

In Transit

Something seems to happen to the average person when they enter an airport. Everything is fine until the terminal sliding doors open and then one whiff of airport air conditioning destroys all spatial awareness and lucidity.

Most make it just past the threshold. The weakest of the bunch get trapped here, stopping suddenly with their baggage-laden trolleys precisely in the middle of the entranceway, blocking any following passengers from harm. They gaze bewildered up and down the concourse as if searching for a sign. The sign in front of them, you know, that one with all the flight numbers and codes, appears as if jumbled.

Eventually one person will manage to break out of the information coma and after a brief period of confusion as the trolleys un-mesh, the group will go into automaton and make their way to the check in.

Check in should be a simple process. Hand over your passport, put your luggage on the scales, pay excess baggage fees if required, then move on. In practice, it is never so. Potential passengers jostle and jockey for position, arriving harassed in front of the airline agent, needing direction before rummaging through bags to find carefully hidden documentation.

Immigration works in the same way which is why passengers are securely corralled. Security is similar. The process for this has been the same for a number of years and for infrequent travellers is laid out on noticeboards along the way. There is usually a queue allowing preparation time but the dazed traveller treats this with disdain, waiting until they are at the conveyor belt to begin, holding up the line as they rummage through luggage. The plastic bag for liquids is

a little complex, as is removing laptops from bags, but it's the contents of the pockets that get most. Mobile phones, keys, cigarette lighters and coins set off the detectors. That's the point. Shoes off, jackets off, empty pockets then repeat in reverse on the other side of the metal detector.

These problem points pale into oblivion compared with the complete disorientation that kicks in at the first appearance of duty free shopping. The Gruen Transfer is the moment in a shopping mall where, surrounded by an intentionally confusing layout, the consumer loses track of their original intentions. It seems this is not limited to shopping malls. Airports trigger the same response. For a coherent, lucid passenger, walking to the departure gate is an exercise in defensive driving as bleary-eyed victims veer luggage trolleys diagonally across the flow of pedestrians, groups spread out in a horizontal line the width of the corridor to prevent overtaking, and at every point people stop suddenly with no thought to the flow of traffic behind them.

Don't even start me on moving walkways. It is not a ride people. It is designed to get you there faster than walking by magnifying your walking speed. Keep walking!

At the departure gate passengers mill around, queuing at least half an hour before the boarding call as if unaware that seats are pre-assigned. Getting on earlier is not going to secure a better position. It may be the fear that their four pieces of oversized hand luggage may lose rank in the battle for overhead locker space that inspires this early eagerness, but whatever the source, any advantage will be lost when the ability to recite the alphabet fails at the plane airlock resulting in the passenger inching their way

down the aisle peering at the seat and row numbers as if suddenly S might come before C. On finding the probably correct seat, the zombified traveller blocks the aisle while they make vital decisions about overhead lockers, jacket on or off, and who gets the window seat.

Arrival is another challenge as the change in air pressure during descent seems to cause temporary deafness, making the announcements to stay seated until arrival at

the terminal redundant. Instead, the majority of passengers leap to their feet, shoving their way into the jam-packed aisle and dragging bags down from the overhead lockers onto the heads of other waiting travellers. This is done in such a hurry that it results in a twenty minute game of sardines while the cabin crew wrestle with getting the airlock open to disgorge the human contents.

Safe travels and thank you for flying with us today.



The Californian desert by air