

## **Arena Singapore 2007**

### **Plane and simple flying rules**

*By Neil Humphreys*

I'm writing this on a plane. Columnists don't write enough columns on planes. They are a limitless source of material. I don't mean the planes themselves. I have suffered people who can calculate every rivet on their Changi-bound behemoth. These individuals must be strangled by their in-flight headsets. It's the only way.

The duty of every flight attendant should encompass checking all exits, miming the safety demonstrations and throttling any plane spotter at the first mention of "wing span" or "engine capacity".

But the flights themselves are nothing less than an anthropological study of our follow-the-herd tribalism.

We all behave in similar fashion, follow airline protocol and adhere closely to the unsaid, unwritten, but universally adopted, code of in-flight etiquette.

We don't fart on planes.

I'm sorry, but we've got to get it out of the way immediately. It's puerile, juvenile toilet talk, but you know you follow the fart code just as closely as I do. On a long-haul flight, the only breaking of wind permitted is from the plane itself.

But why? Every other orifice utterance is tolerated. Coughing, sneezing, nose-blowing, crying, screaming: I've been entertained by them all, an in-flight orifice orchestra if you will. Indeed, on one memorable occasion, my wife squeezed abruptly with such violence, her head and chair shot back and she almost ended up in the woman's braised beef behind.

On a flight from London to Singapore several years ago, a two-year-old monster child managed to sustain one continuous larynx-ripping scream for 13 hours. It was a phenomenal achievement. More so because I had a front row seat and the majority of her performance was projected directly into my middle ear. Her mother, who did for parenthood what sunglasses do for one-eared men, made commendable attempts to silence Chucky by patting him gently on the back once an hour while flicking through a magazine.

"I'm so sorry," she muttered, as my left ear began to whiter and die. "She's always like this."

"So you regularly take her on to 13-hour flights to practice her primal therapy technique then?"

If's it not screaming, it's weeping.

As I jot this down in what I hope is illegible handwriting, I occasionally take a fleeting glance across my right shoulder to ensure my next-door neighbour doesn't decipher this and jab her water bottle into my eye.

When she took her seat beside me a couple of hours ago, she burst into tears. It was most distressing. I couldn't hear the movie.

The flight attendant made a rather perfunctory enquiry about the passenger's well-being before being told it was a "personal matter". She's been weeping on and off ever since. What could I do? What could I say? What is a personal matter? A family bereavement? A two-timing boyfriend? No fish on the menu? If I pry, she could either cuddle or kill me. In the end, I wisely settle for a little eye contact every other hour, a kindly smile and the chance to share my nuts.

So tears, screams, sneezes and half-arsed parental apologies are all accepted practices on a plane, but if there's so much as a peep from my underneath then I'm sent to plane purgatory.

Being a vegetarian, I've just demolished a decent vegetable korma and half my body weight in coke. Where is all that combustible gas supposed to go? Airlines are constantly introduced more complicated, and expensive, surveillance techniques to unearth the latest terrorism devices at check-in, but never think about the 350 gassy, ticking time bombs that fill every flight.

My preferred technique – which I know you've all attempted during long-haul flights – is a slow release as I exit stage left for the leg-stetcher down the aisle. Upon returning minutes later, I sniff the air disapprovingly and feign my disgust at my inconsiderate neighbours.

Never fails.

Long-haul flights also lend themselves to bizarre exchanges – or their complete lack of – between perfect strangers.

On my left sits an Australian chap, who is around my age and we may have plenty of common and a potentially inexhaustible supply of witty anecdotes to share to pass the time. In four hours, we've not exchanged a single word. The only time he acknowledged the presence of another human being beside him came when I dropped my headphones and he giggled.

The bastard.

But we're sitting beside each other. Less than 10cm apart. We share an arm. Our elbows constantly touch each other. We're confined together for over eight hours. I've had less intimate relationships with teenage girlfriends.

But we don't talk to each other. We don't want to strike up a conversation. That's the point. We're actually two kindred spirits. We're normal, sensible types. Hence the

comfortable silence. It's only the deranged, shouldn't-be-allowed-to-travel-alone lunatics who kick off conversations with strangers and sustain them energetically – and largely single-handedly – for eight hours.

I once flew from Singapore to Sydney sitting beside a good old country boy from Down Under. He could talk shit for Australia. His interminable drivel reached its nadir when he spent 15 minutes arguing – with himself- whether Mad Max 2 was indeed called Mad Max 2, or The Road Warrior, or, my particular favourite, Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior. No, silence is golden. Inane musings about Mel Gibson movie titles are very, very bad. But it isn't total silence next door. The quiet Australian is one of those few souls left in the world who believe no-one else can hear them over their headphones. Remember when you're techno-ignorant grandmother tried on headphones and proceeded to shout at everyone else in the living room?

Well, it feels like I've got my grandmother sitting beside me. I'm being treated to an incessant laughter track. He's sharing the movie's best lines with everyone else in the cabin. He's watching Evan Almighty for heaven's sake. There aren't that many laughs in the entire movie.

It's time to register my disapproval. The korma and the coke are butting heads and producing all kinds of delightful whiz-bangs in my stomach. I think I'll go and stretch my legs again.