

JUMP SEATS

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Welcome to the secret world of jump seats. You know what they are, right? They're the seat (or seats) in the cockpit of an airliner that is not the pilot's seat. And they have stories to tell.

The thing about jump seats to pilots— who mostly ride in them --is that they are f-r-e-e. And pilots like free. The most common phrase made by a "jumpseater" wanting a ride is, "Mind if I hitch a ride?" And the usual answer is, "Not at all. Welcome aboard." And the story behind that exchange is: today you are the pilot but tomorrow *you* may be the guy asking for the jump seat.

The 'jump seat deal' was, for a long time, a very cordial arrangement. It was like "I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine." But, of course, as happens in business and life, politics entered into the fray. Before long, we had an "approved jump seat list." If you're airline was on it, you got the seat (space available, of course). If not, you got a "no-go." Pilots from your own airline always had priority over the pilots of another airline. That was just understood. Unless a Fed wanted up front to give a Line Check, then the Fed got priority. Truth be known, many Line Checks were the Feds way of getting a free ride to a cousin's wedding in Poughkeepsie.

Before we get too much further into this, we have to talk about jump seat design. I don't know that I've ever met a jump seat design engineer but my guess is that they're a strange lot. Maybe even a little sadistic. I mean, jump seats are not widely known for their comfort. They fold up, down, over, around and backwards. Some fit directly behind the pilot's seat in front of you.....but with no consideration for where your knees are supposed to go. Another jump seat I know of used the back of the cockpit door as the backrest. Every time a Flight Attendant would open the cockpit door the "jumpseater" would fall backwards-- especially if he was asleep. But most pilots, like Pavlov's dogs, learned to lean forward in the seat at the first sound of the door being opened. But, hey, no matter, the ride was still f-r-e-e.

One thing my airline did that not many other airlines do was to allow a "jumpseater" to sit in the passenger cabin if there was space available. I liked that arrangement. That way you didn't have some guy drooling cracker crumbs on your shoulder or showing you pictures of his girlfriend while you were trying to fly. (True story.)

Of course, Captains had broad discretion in who rode in the jump seat. They are, after all, responsible for the safety of the entire flight. I remember one Captain, Stan, told the story of pilot of another airline who stepped into the cockpit wanting a ride and said, "Think I'll ride up here to see if you guys can fly this jet." Well.....that comment didn't set too well with Stan who turned and said, "I want you to pick up your stuff and get off this airplane." And the guy did.

The moral of the story? Right after being on the approved jump seat list, the next requirement is courtesy and humility. It's rather an unspoken rule, but it *is* a rule. As it is to always say "thank you" after the flight.

Many times, how you treated a "jumpseater" had a lot to do with how you were treated at his airline. One time, my bride and I were flying 'space available' and were assigned the last two seats on the flight. Except that, when we got on board, there turned out to be only *one* seat left in the passenger cabin. I looked up front and the cockpit jump seat was open. I walked up, showed my airline ID and said, "No more seats back there. Mind if I hitch a ride up here?" Pretty short notice for a jump seat but the Captain said, "Sure. No Problem." He had a blank jump seat pass in his flight bag, handed it to me to fill out, then handed a copy to the gate agent and away we went. For years after that, any time an Alaska pilot wanted a jump seat from me, he got it. (Of course, after the flight, the up-front Flight Attendant said, "At least fifty passengers asked, 'How come that guy got to sit up there?'")

Jump seats have a dress code, usually described as 'business casual.' Generally, that doesn't include blue jeans, which is exactly what I had on when I stumbled upon an earlier flight in Chicago to where I wanted to go. I thought, 'What the heck. I'll give it a try.' The gate agent put me on the flight. Enroute, the youngish First Officer gave me a little guff about my attire but the Captain, who turned out to be a horse/rodeo-type guy, had no problem at all with blue jeans and cowboy boots. I am forever grateful to Larry at United.

Of course, a whole lot of the above changed after those scum bags flew into the Twin Towers on 9/11. There is evidence that they scouted their plan using fake ID's and riding jump seats. ("Scum bags" is too gentle a description for them.) So now jump seat agreements are much more restrictive. For a while, only the pilots of your own airline could ride in your jump seat. Some of that may have loosened up a bit since I've been retired but, still, things *are* more restrictive. That's too bad. It was a perk of the profession but.....safety trumps all.

Okay, couple more stories: I once had a Fed come into the cockpit, flash his ID, and hand over his jump seat pass. Thing is, the guy was *large*. He got on the jump seat okay but was having a good deal of difficulty fastening the shoulder harness-type seat belt. The Flight Attendant was in the doorway saying, "We're all buttoned-up. Cabin's secure." I said, "Hold on just a second." I was thinking, 'We're going to have to take a delay because this guy can't fasten his seatbelt. How am I going to explain that to the passengers?' But he managed. He put his hand under his belly, lifted it, sucked in mightily and slid the seatbelt under and got it fastened....barely. He then let go of everything after which his eyes bugged out and his face turned red. (Sorry, just tellin' it like it was.) And away we went. And we passed the Line Check, too. Probably because the guy couldn't move or think all the while he was strapped in.

Another time-- and this story still bothers me to this day --a female stepped into the cockpit with a jump seat pass and an airline ID. Fine.....except that she was wearing a short, tight skirt.

My little 'pilot mind' immediately flashed, 'What's up with that? What lady pilot would ask for a jump seat dressed like that?' I mean, in this particular jump seat you sit astraddle the console, your knees two feet apart. The height/weight/age looked about right on her ID. The picture was a bit smudged but looked *kinda* like her. Fortunately there was room in the passenger cabin so I handed her paperwork back and said, "Welcome aboard. There's room in the back." To this day I still think it was a fake ID. All my First Officer, much younger than I and single, could manage was, "Dang!"

Pilots and jump seats...the stuff of lore.