

By
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STRANDED AT THE AIRPORT

There's snow in Chicago, lightning over Bermuda, a smoking engine that required a hasty return to Hong Kong. Delays, delays, delays. They're all part of the indignities of air travel and you can either grouse your way through them or make the best of them. The latter strategy offers far more rewards.



1. Have a stroll

When I was a kid, Metro Airport in Detroit offered a very long walk between two terminals designed with 1950's bargain basement modernist style. They were dingy but had a bracing character that was unmistakable. I loved strolling from the end of Davey to the end of Smith and back, pausing in the lobby of Marriott hotel that connected the two terminals to gawk at the automotive fat cats throwing back cocktails with their molls. That was the real Detroit when Detroit was very much a going concern. Once you're on a plane, you may as well be in leg-irons. Fidgeting with your phone as you glance at the television screen in the departure lounge is an artless waste of an opportunity. A good walk is a great way to prepare for your detention aboard and to enjoy some choice people watching as well. The whole world travels these days. Have a good look as you cruise the terminal. Your legs and your spirit will thank you.

2. Have a drink

Despite countless warnings from countless health gurus and travel bloggers about tipping before and during a flight, a delay is an open invitation for a drink. Terminal A at Reagan National in Washington is a dynamite old terminal that has exactly one bar and it's not much at that. I do recall, however, that the bartender was a charming fellow with a sympathetic air. His name was Napoleon, an émigré from Ethiopia who remembered watching a double bill on a Saturday afternoon as a kid in one of the great movie theatres that Mussolini built in Addis Ababa in the 1930's.

Some people balk at paying top dollar for a brew. Face the music. Airport bars are stitch-ups. If you want to wet your whistle and bide some time, open your wallet wide and pull up a stool next to a fellow traveller. If you're lucky, you'll hear plenty of crazy things. If you're unlucky, you'll hear plenty of crazy things. Then you'll need a drink or five on the plane.

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4. Go into Town

We've all read stories about refugees and dissidents who become trapped in an airport when they can't return to their own country and won't be admitted to the one where they've landed. Countless novelists and essayists have mused on how the airport is part and parcel of the "global soul," that strange dissipated sense of self that comes from too much air travel and too many nights spent in joyless five star hotels in cities that all seem to have been blighted by globalization. Don't believe it. If you have the time and the credentials, go into town. During one extended flight delay, I managed to sneak into Georgetown and enjoy a beautiful lunch at Michel Richard's Citronelle. On another occasion, I journeyed into Manhattan from JFK and spent a glorious day roaming around Manhattan before returning to JFK to catch a delayed flight to Rio.

When you're stranded at the airport, you're not really stranded. Free your mind and you can beat the clock at its own game.

3. Watch the birds

Chris Marker's legendary science fiction film, *La Jetée*, begins and ends with a young boy on the observation deck at Orly Airport. The miracle of flight is something to behold. It is time travel that is safer than a car and once was more exciting than riding a bus. If you are at airports with a good view of the runways, take the opportunity to commune with the big silver birds that swoop in and out. Outside decks are best; for me, jet fuel is as a powerful stimulator of the imagination as woodsmoke is on a beach. At the end of his book on the Ali-Foreman fight in Zaire in 1975, George Plimpton watched young boys gather at the end of the runway and lay down in the long grass that was swept up in the rush of jet engines. Be those boys in your heart and youth is yours at the airport.