

Featured Article

BY ANUPENDRA SHARMA

Flying Aeroflot

Whatever you've ever

heard about Aeroflot, I can confirm its all true. Of course, my story goes back to 1993, when I boarded a giant Aeroflot plane to Manchester, England. A lot may have changed since then, but my memories are fossilized forever – after all, it was my first ever flight out of India at the impressionable young age of 22.

Enticed by the 50% savings offered by the world's largest airline, I boarded an aging plane with ripped seats and the old fan blowing cold air that only stopped when I tore out pages from the safety manual and squeezed them into the little vent. Most people on the flight were desis traveling for the first time, likely lured by the stories of riches in exporting leather, silks and garments, the possibility of illegally crossing the border into Eastern Europe or attracted by the flourishing life of Indian underworld criminals holed up in the lawless Moscow of the late-90s.



I come from a family of well-traveled, highly opinionated Dilliwallahs, who have

categorized every airline based on a) quality of food b) quantity of soaps and eau d'cologne bottles available for stealing and c) the airlines' gullibility in believing that it was their fault that our brand new suitcases were turned into old, broken, belted old Indian suitcases on the 8-10 hour flights that my family members took. In their opinion Aeroflot ranked rock bottom in all three categories, so I boarded the plane expecting nothing.

Well, food was one thing Aeroflot got right. I remember the Indian food served on the flight being fabulous and I am still waiting for remotely comparable fare on any of the higher ranked airlines that I have flown since.

There was a lot of yelling and screaming on the flight, most of which was done by the stone-faced and rather rude flight attendants, when they did show up. Most of the time they hid in their work zones, unsmiling, unhappy and rather bored with their jobs.

I wouldn't blame them completely. Many excited passengers traveling for the first time, did manage to make quite a nuisance of themselves. I continued begging for water, but my pleas went unanswered, till one flight attendant came to me and sternly told me to "drink at the airport" as we approached Dubai.

Dubai ?

An hour into the flight, the pilot announced that the Delhi-Moscow-Manchester flight was going to make a stop in Dubai.

Dubai ? My thoughts exactly.

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We made a 2 hour unscheduled stop at the glittering Dubai airport, where us rather-stretched-for-dollars Aeroflot passengers ogled at the pretty Thai shopkeepers, the Benzes and the Rolls Royces, the 24 carat gold bricks and the vast display of consumer electronics. Needless to say, no one bought anything, and when we got back on the flight, I wondered which corporate executive had the bright idea to convince Aeroflot to unload its high-rollers in Dubai. I did notice that Indians were running the airport, saw Arab security herding some sub-continental workers like cattle, saw Thai shopkeepers being rude to the Indians who daringly tried to enquire about prices, and decided that this was one place that Indians were still a long way from being welcome.

We reached Moscow without incident, but due to our Dubai layover, my flight to Manchester had

already left. So had the connection to Frankfurt. There was one plane waiting to take off for London with a hundred seats left. As four hundred of us ambled off the airplane, the horrible stories of passengers being stranded in Moscow airport for days (some true, some likely urban rumors), flashed through my head.

I raced to the front desk, past the long queue that was beginning to form.

“Please. I need to get to England today. My whole career will be ruined if I don’t get there today. The university said they would give my seat to someone else if I did not show up tomorrow morning. Please help me”, I begged at the desk.

I don’t know if they understood a word of what I was saying. If they did, I am sure they saw the logic. Any way, the airline clerk pulled out a pre-printed boarding pass and crossed out the name. She wrote in capital letters “A SHARMA” and handed someone’s else’s freedom to me. I could have kissed her!

I raced to the second line that was forming literally 20 feet away to board the London flight that was leaving shortly. My panic began to subside.

“Passport, Sir” said the smartly dressed security officer. I handed him my passport and boarding pass.

“We have problem, Sir. Come with me”, he said. My heart began racing again. He took me aside, merely ten feet away. Since he was the only person in-charge of boarding, the whole

line of passengers boarding for London came to a standstill, and everyone began to stare at us.

“Problem with your passport, Sir” he stated, looking down at my freshly minted passport and hand-scrawled boarding pass.

“What problem ?” I asked.



“Have you got cigarettes ?”

Through the fog of rising panic, my Indian instincts kicked in. I had heard of Russian corruption, and here I was evidencing it first hand. For once I regretted not being a smoker.

“Sorry, I don’t smoke. I have dollars” I said hurriedly.

“Give me dollars” he said.

“Is five dollars ok ?” I enquired meekly in a low voice. He did not understand or hear me. I pulled out my wallet, holding it close to me. I should start low, I thought and pulled out three dollar bills.

The security guard’s eyes lit up. He took the money and smiled broadly.

“Happy flight” he said, standing back and saluting smartly. I smiled at him too, as a wave of relief washed over. Now I know why Indians and Russians shared a bond. We were the same people, we spoke the same language.

I boarded the flight, realizing that every passenger had seen me pay him off. Maybe some others paid up too. I didn’t care. I was safe. I was headed for England. Some naïve British passengers were indignant at the way I was treated. I promised them I would write to the Chairman of Aeroflot, while wondering how this race had conquered the world. The Indians congratulated me on getting a bargain. I smiled and sat down in my seat.

The journey remained eventful. I sat next to a completely drunk Russian opera singer, who spoke no English, kept bending on one knee to kiss the hand of the woman sitting next to me and sang in a deep, loud, grating voice to her. Judging by the sounds coming from him, I could see why Italian opera was more popular.

The airhostesses didn’t come to our aid, choosing to chatter and laugh mostly at my predicament. When we landed in London, they stuck the immigration cards in his pocket. He had fallen into a drunken sleep, and snored loudly as the plane disembarked, and we made a hurried exit away from him. I still wonder if he ever made it through immigration.

At Heathrow, the Aeroflot desk feigned ignorance about us. After an hour of pleading and some phone calls by the staff to Moscow, they gave us boarding passes to British Airways, which was a pleasant, if unmemorable, 45 minute flight to Manchester. In case you want to know, there was no food, but they served Snickers ice cream.

A couple of years later I read an article in the Guardian about a journalist’s visit to Moscow. He was stranded and it cost him \$22 to get out of there.

I smiled to myself. Capitalism was alive and well in Moscow. †