



## THE WORLD ACCORDING TO CLARKSON

Jeremy Clarkson made his name presenting a poky motoring programme on BBC2 called *Top Gear*. He left to forge a career in other directions but made a complete hash of everything and ended up back on *Top Gear* again. He lives with his wife, Francie, and three children in Oxfordshire. Despite this, he has a clean driving licence.

# The World According to Clarkson

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JEREMY CLARKSON



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To Francie

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# Another Day's Holiday? Please, Give Me a Break

According to a poll, the vast majority of people questioned as they struggled back to work last week thought that England should have followed Scotland's lead and made Tuesday a bank holiday.

Two things strike me as odd here. First, that anyone could be bothered to undertake such research and, second, that anyone in their right mind could think that the Christmas break was in some way too short.

I took ten days off and by 11 o'clock on the first morning I had drunk fourteen cups of coffee, read all the newspapers and the *Guardian* and then... and then what?

By lunchtime I was so bored that I decided to hang a few pictures. So I found a hammer, and later a man came to replaster the bits of wall I had demolished. Then I tried to fix the electric gates, which work only when there's an omega in the month. So I went down the drive with a spanner, and later another man came to put them back together again.

I was just about to start on the Aga, which had broken down on Christmas Eve, as they do when my wife took me on one side by my earlobe and explained that builders do not, on the whole, spend their spare time writing, so writers should not build on their days off. It's expensive and it can be dangerous, she said.

She's right. We have these lights in the dining room which are supposed to project stars onto the table below. It has never really bothered me that the light seeps out of the sides so the stars are invisible; but when you are bored, this is exactly the sort of thing that gets on your nerves.

So I bought some gaffer tape and suddenly my life had a purpose. There was something to do.

Mercifully, Christmas intervened before I could do any more damage, but then it went away again and once more I found myself staring at the day through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars. Each morning, bed and the blessed relief of unconsciousness seemed so far away.

I wore a groove in the kitchen floor with endless trips to the fridge, hoping against hope that I had somehow missed a plateful of cold sausages on the previous 4,000 excursions. Then, for no obvious reason, I decided to buy a footstool.

I took the entire family to the sort of gifty-wifty shop where the smell of pot-pourri is so pungent that it makes you go cross-eyed. Even though the children were lying on the floor gagging, I still spent hours deliberately choosing a footstool that was too small and the wrong colour so that I could waste some more time taking it back.

The next day, still gently redolent of Delia Smith's knicker drawer, I decided to buy the wrong sort of antique filing cabinet. But after the footstool debacle my wife said no. So it seemed appropriate that I should develop some kind of illness. This is a good idea when you are at a loose end because everything, up to and including herpes, is better than being bored.

It's hard, I know, to summon up a bout of genital sores at will, but with a little effort you can catch a cold which, if you whimper enough, will easily pass for flu. And yup, even lying in bed watching Judy Finnegan in a Santa suit beats the terminal cancer that is boredom.

Boredom forces you to ring people you haven't seen for eighteen years and halfway through the conversation you remember why you left it so long. Boredom means you start to read not only mail-order catalogues but also the advertising inserts that fall on the floor. Boredom gives you half a mind to get a gun and go berserk in the local shopping centre, and you know where this is going. Eventually, boredom means you will take up golf.

On the day before Christmas Eve I sat next to a chap on the train who, as we pulled out of Paddington, called his wife to say that he was finished, that he had retired and that from now on his life was entirely his own. He was trying to sound happy about it, but there was a faraway, baleful look in his eyes which said it all.

He would spend a month or two at home, breaking interior fixtures and fittings and generally killing everything in the garden, and then one day he would accept an invitation to tee off and that would be it. His life would be over long before he actually stopped breathing. Pity. He seemed like a nice chap.

Or what about fishing? You see those people sitting on the side of the canal in the drizzle and you wonder: how bored do you have to be at home for that to be better?

The answer, I suspect, is 'not very'. After a week I was at screaming pitch and I couldn't even cook some sausages to put in the fridge because one afternoon, when my wife wasn't looking, I had tried to mend the Aga. And the thing had come off.

I could have put it back, of course, but strangely, when you're not busy, there is never enough time to do anything. I wrote a letter and still have not found enough space in the day to put it in an envelope. Mind you, this might have something to do with the fact that I spent eight hours last Tuesday on the lavatory. Well, it's as good a hobby as any.

Apparently the British work longer hours than anyone else in Europe and stern-faced men are always telling us that this causes stress and heart disease. Fair point; but not working, I assure you, would give us all piles.

Sunday 7 January 20

# All This Health and Safety Talk is Just Killing Me

You may recall that after the Hatfield train crash last year six-chins Prescott, our deputy prime minister, turned up at the scene and gave the distinct impression that with a bit more effort and a lot more investment, nobody would die on the railways ever again.

There was a similar response last week to the news that the number of people caught drinking and driving in the run-up to Christmas rose by 0.1 per cent. All sorts of sandalistas have been on the radio to explain that if the drink-drive limit were lowered to minus eight and the police were empowered to shoot motorists on sight, then death on the road would become a thing of the past.

These people go on to tell us that mobile phones will cook our children's ears, that long-haul flights will fill our legs with thrombosis and that meat is murder. They want an end to all deaths – and it doesn't stop there. They don't even see why anyone should have to suffer from a spot of light bruising.

Every week, as we filmed my television chat show, food would be spilt on the floor, and every week the recording would have to be stopped so it could be swept away. 'What would happen,' said the man from health and safety, 'if a cameraman were to slip over?'

'Well,' I would reply, 'he'd probably have to stand up again.'

Like every big organisation these days, the BBC is obsessed with the wellbeing of those who set foot on its premises. Studios must display warning notices if there is real glass on the set, and the other day I was presented with a booklet explaining how to use a door. I am not kidding.

So you can imagine the problems I shall encounter this week when, for a television series I'm making, I shall climb into a decompression chamber to find out what life would be like on an airliner at 30,000 feet if one of the windows were to break.

The poor producer has been given a form the size of Luxembourg which asks what hazards I will face. Well, my lungs will explode and the air in the cavities under my fillings will expand ninefold, causing untold agony, but I probably won't feel this because there is a good chance that the subsequent hypoxia will turn me into a dribbling vegetable.

I consider it a risk worth taking, but my thoughts are irrelevant because these days my life and how I live it are in the hands of the men from health and safety. The same people who said last year I could not fly in a US-Army helicopter because the pilot was not BBC-approved.

Oh, come on. Everyone knows that American forces are not allowed to crash their helicopters. Following the 1993 debacle in Somalia, when they lost sixteen men who were sent in to rescue two already dead comrades, it has now been decided that no US serviceman will ever be hurt again. Not even in a war.

This has now spread to Britain. You've read, I'm sure, about the hearing damage which can be caused by sergeant-majors who shout at privates, but the plague goes deeper than that. On a visit to RAF Henlow last week, I was rather surprised to see that someone from health and safety had pinned a poster to the notice board, warning the fighter pilots that alcohol will make them aggressive and violent. Oh no, that's the last thing we want – aggressive and

violent fighter pilots.

Then we have Britain's fleet of nuclear-powered hunter killer submarines, which have all been grounded or whatever it is you do with boats, by health and safety because they could be dangerous.

Now attention has been focused on Britain's stockpile of uranium-depleted missiles, which are by far and away the best method of penetrating the armour on enemy tanks. Great, except health and safety doesn't like them because it turns out they might kill someone.

Former squaddies are on the news saying that they loosed off a few rounds in Kosovo and now they have caught cancer. Deepest sympathies, but let's look at some facts. The only way depleted uranium can get through the skin is if someone shoots you with a bullet made out of it. It can get into the body through the lungs, but since it is 40 per cent less radioactive than uranium that occurs naturally in the ground, it does seem unlikely that it could cause any damage. I have been down a uranium mine in Western Australia and, so far, I have not grown another head.

However, I do find it odd that the Ministry of Defence will test only soldiers who served in Kosovo and not those who were in the Gulf, where 300 tons of depleted uranium were used and the alpha radiation has had longer to do its stuff. But if by some miracle it does find that our boys have been irradiated and that one squaddie died as a result, then we can be assured that depleted uranium will, in future, be used only on NATO, rather than by NATO.

Where will this end? The US Air Force managed to kill seven British soldiers in the Gulf with what it likes to call friendly fire, so would it not be sensible for those of a health and safety persuasion to ban Americans from the battlefield, too?

Some people say global warming and ozone depletion will kill us. But I'm far more worried about the people who have made it their sworn duty to keep us all alive.

Sunday 14 January 20

# Men are a Lost Cause, and We're Proud of It

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Being a man, I am unwilling to pull over and ask someone for directions, because this would imply they are somehow cleverer than me. And obviously they're not, because I'm toasty warm in a car and they're mooching around on foot.

Sometimes, though, and usually in a town where the council has let a group of fourteen-year-olds from one of its special schools design a one-way system, I have been known to give up, become a traitor to my gender and ask a passer-by for advice.

What a complete waste of time. If they begin by saying 'er', then they don't know and you are going to waste hours while they wonder whether you go left at Sketchley's or right. So here's a tip. If someone hesitates when you ask the way, or even if a look of bewilderment befalls their countenance for the briefest moment, drive off.

Of course, some launch immediately into a bunch of militaristic directions, involving clear concise hand signals and bushy-topped trees at nine o'clock.

But that's of no help either because you won't be listening. It is a known medical fact, and it has been so since the dawn of time, that a man will hear the first word and then shut down.

When the Romans invaded England, they went home to celebrate and didn't come back for 80 years. Why? Because they couldn't find it and, if they did ask for directions in France, they didn't listen.

In the late thirteenth century, Edward Longshanks used women to steer his armies around the realm because they could listen to, and absorb, directions, whereas men couldn't. Actually, I just made that up. But there must be a vestige of truth in it because if he had relied for guidance on his knights, he'd have ended up in Falmouth rather than Falkirk.

Certainly, I didn't listen last week when, having been unable to find the shop I wanted, I found myself drawn inexorably by the man magnet that is Tottenham Court Road into one of those temples to the pagan world of meaningless beeps and unusual hieroglyphics: Computer 'R' Us.

I didn't listen to the voices in my head telling me to get out and nor did I listen when the man started to explain all about a new type of Sony laptop that has too many vowels in its name to be pronounceable. It begins with a V and then you have to make the sort of noise a cat would emit if you fed it through a mangle.

Now don't worry, this isn't going to be a column about how I don't understand computers, and how I wish I were back on the *Rotherham Advertiser* feeding bits of bog roll into a sit-up-and-beg Remington.

I like computers very much and I know enough about them to send emails, write stories and find some ladyboys in Thailand. Unfortunately, however, I do not know as much about them as the people who work or hang around in computer shops, which means my mind does that man thing and stops working.

Like, for instance, if you were offered the choice of Windows 2000 or Windows 98, you'd go for the bigger number. But the man in the shop advised me to spend less on the 98 and, when asked why, proceeded for all I know to talk about his Newfoundland terrier. I did not hear a single thing he said.

The one thing I wanted was an ability to send emails via a cellular phone, so I asked: ‘Can plug this into my mobile?’ And he replied... but frankly, he may as well have been talking about the problems of making decent onion gravy while marooned in a Nepalese hill fort.

So I ended up buying it... and now I think it’s broken. Every time I log off from the internet the machine shuts down, casting whatever I’ve written that day into a silicon no man’s land.

Obviously, I could take the computer back to the shop, but then they’ll find that I’ve been looking at ladyboys and this will be embarrassing. Besides, I can’t remember where the shop was, and I’m damned if I’m going to ask.

I could phone a friend, but it would be a waste of a call because, as a man, I’m just an ego covered in skin and, if he knows how to solve my problem, that’s going to cause some light bruising. So I won’t listen. And if he doesn’t know, then he’s of no help anyway.

At this point, a woman would reach for the instruction book, but this is the single biggest difference between the sexes. Forget the need to be cuddled after sex. And forget spatial awareness and fuzzy logic, because the most butch woman in the world, even Mrs Thatcher, would lie on her stomach for hours with the manual for a new video recorder, ensuring that when she gets back from dinner that night she will have taped the right channel at the right time.

How dull is that. Me? I stab away at various buttons safe in the knowledge that I could be taping something on the other side, next Tuesday, which might be much better.

This certainly helps when playing board games. Because I’ve never read the rules for Monopoly, I travel around the board in whichever direction seems to be most appropriate, and if anyone says I have to go clockwise, I respond with a strange faraway look.

It always works. I always win.

Sunday 21 January 20

# We Let Them Get Away with Murder on Radio

It's coming to something when the news is making the news, but that is exactly what happened at the beginning of last week when the papers were full of ITN's victory over the BBC in the Battle of the Ten 'clock Bongs.

The BBC explained afterwards that it had twice as many stories, twice as many live reports and twice as much foreign coverage, but it was stymied by ITV, which ran *Millionaire* two minutes late and went straight to its bulletin without a commercial break.

It even had the gallant knight Sir Trevor McDonald crop up in the middle of Chris Tarrant to say there would be some news soon and not to go away.

This ratings war is getting dirty and deeply annoying. In the past, when programmes largely began on the hour or at half past, you could watch a show on ITV and then, when it had finished, find something else that was just starting on another channel.

But look at the schedules now. Things start at five past and finish at twelve minutes to, so by the time you flick over to the Beeb's new drama series you've missed the explosion and the subsequent car chase and have no idea what's going on.

I understand why it has to happen, of course. When I worked on *Top Gear* it didn't matter whether we were featuring a new Ferrari that ran on water or standing around in a field pretending to be sheep, we always got the same viewing figures. However, if the programme began late, after all the other channels had started their 8.30 p.m. shows, we would drop 1 million or so.

Interestingly, however, this type of 'schedule shuffling' does not seem to be happening in the world of radio.

My wife, for instance, listens only to Radio 4. It could run a two-hour shipping forecast and still she would not retune to another station. I know for a fact that, like the rest of the country, she has no clue what Melvyn Bragg is talking about on *In Our Time*, but every Thursday morning the whole house echoes to the unfathomable pontifications of his stupefyingly dull guests.

At 10.25 a.m. every day I point out that over on Radio 2 Ken Bruce has a good quiz about pop music – a subject she enjoys very much – but for some extraordinary reason she prefers to listen to the state of the sea at Dogger Bank.

I am no better. Left to my own devices I start the day with Terry Wogan, who last week got it into his head that all Chinese people smell of Brussels sprouts. Then it's Ken's pop quiz followed by Jimmy Old.

Now at this point I should turn over, because Old bombards his listeners with the big-band sound and talks to his guests about the price of fish. Then people call up and read out the editorial from the *Daily Telegraph* and it's just not me. But no. I sit there saying that it's only for two hours and then it'll be time for Steve Wright.

Why do I do this? On television I only need to catch the tiniest glimpse of a spangly jacket, the suggestion of a Birmingham accent or the first bar of the *EastEnders* theme tune, and in one fluid movement I reach for the remote and switch over. Yet, displaying the sort of brand loyalty that would cause Marks & Spencer to pickle me in brine, I will drive for hour after

hour while Old drones on about how Mrs Nazi of Esher thinks asylum seekers should all be shot.

There is a choice. Obviously Radio 1 is out, unless you enjoy being serenaded by people banging bits of furniture together, and Radio 3 transmits nothing but the sound of small animals being tortured. What about local radio? In London there is Magic FM which broadcasts the Carpenters all day long. Of course, the Carpenters are fine – especially when you have a headache – but between the tunes men come on and speak.

I should have thought that being a disc jockey wasn't so bad. I mean, it could be worse. But obviously I'm wrong, because nowhere in the whole of humanity will you find a bunch of people quite so unhappy as the CD spinners on 'Misery' FM.

By 8 a.m. on a Monday they are already counting down the hours to Friday night as though all of us treat the working week as something that has to be endured. In their world, we all work for Cruella De Vil. And it's always raining.

Even if it's a bright sunny day and we've just heard on the news that John Prescott has burst, they would still find something to moan about and then it's on to *Yesterday Once More* for the fourteenth time since 6 a.m.

There is no point in going elsewhere because quite the reverse applies. Misery FM is largely run by people on their way down the career ladder, but elsewhere in local radio most of the DJs believe themselves to be on the way up – so they sound as if they're talking to you while someone is pushing Harpic up their nostrils with an electric toothbrush.

'Who knows?' they must be thinking. 'A television producer might be listening, so if I'm really zany and wacky all the time I'll end up on the box.'

Too right, matey, but on television they'll see you coming and switch channels.

On the radio, for some extraordinary reason, they won't.

Sunday 28 January 20



# Willkommen and Achtung, This is Austrian Hospitality

A small tip. The border between Switzerland and Austria may be marked with nothing more than a small speed hump, and the customs hut may appear to be deserted, but whatever you do, stop. If you don't, your rear-view mirror will fill with armed men in uniform and the stillness of the night will be shattered with searchlights and klaxons.

I'm able to pass on this handy hint because last week, while driving in convoy with my camera crew from St Moritz to Innsbruck, a man suddenly leapt out of his darkened hut and shouted: '*Achtung.*'

I have no idea what '*achtung*' means, except that it usually precedes a bout of gunfire followed by many years of digging tunnels. I therefore pulled over and stopped, unlike the crew, who didn't.

The man, white with rage and venom and fury, demanded my passport and refused to give it back until I had furnished him with details of the people in the other car which had dared to sail past his guard tower.

I'd often wondered how I'd get on in this sort of situation. Would I allow myself to be tortured to save my colleagues? How strong is my will, my playground-learnt bond? How long would I hold out?

About three seconds, I'm ashamed to say. Even though I have two spare passports, I blabbed like a baby, handing over the crew's names, addresses and mobile phone number.

So they came back, and the driver was manhandled from the car and frogmarched up to the stop sign he'd ignored. His passport was confiscated and then it was noticed that all his camera equipment had not been checked out of Switzerland. We were in trouble.

So we raised our hands, and do you know what? The guard didn't even bat an eyelid. The sight of four English people standing at a border post in the middle of Europe, in the year 2001, with their arms in the air didn't strike him as even remotely odd.

We have become used to a gradual erosion of interference with international travel. You only know when you've gone from France into Belgium, for instance, because the road suddenly goes all bumpy. French customs are normally on strike and their opposite numbers in Belgium are usually hidden behind a mountain of chips with a mayonnaise topping.

But in Austria things are very different. Here you will not find a fatty working out his pension. Our man on the road from St Moritz to Innsbruck was a lean, frontline storm trooper in full camouflage fatigues and he seemed to draw no distinction between the Englishman and the Turk or Slav. Nobody, it seems, is welcome in the Austro-Hungarian empire.

The camera crew, who were very disappointed at the way I'd grassed them up and kept referring to me as 'Von Strimmer' or simply 'The Invertebrate', were ordered back to Switzerland. And me? For selling them out, I was allowed to proceed to Innsbruck.

Which does invite a question. How did the guard know where I was going? We had never mentioned our destination and yet he knew. It gets stranger, because minutes later I was pulled over for speeding and even though I had a Zurich-registered car, the policeman addressed me straight away in English.

This puzzled me as I drove on and into the longest tunnel in the world. That was puzzling,

too, as it wasn't marked on the map. What's happening on the surface that they don't want u  
to see?

Finally I arrived at the hotel into which I'd been booked, but a mysterious woman in a full length evening gown explained menacingly that she had let my room to someone else. And that all the other hotels in Innsbruck were fully booked.

Paranoia set in and took on a chilling air when I learnt that one of the army bobsleigh people I was due to meet the following day had been kicked to death outside a nightclub.

I ended up miles away at a hotel run by a man we shall call 'The Downloader'. 'So, you are an Englisher,' he said, when I checked in. 'There are many good people in England,' he added with the sort of smile that made me think he might be talking about Harold Shipman.

Something is going on in Austria. They've told the world that the Freedom Party leader has stepped down, but how do we know he's gone and won't be back? Let's not forget these people are past masters at subterfuge.

I mean, they managed to convince the entire planet that Adolf Hitler was a German. Most people here do think Haider will be back. As chancellor. And that's a worry.

I'm writing this now in my room, hoping to send it via email to the *Sunday Times* but each time I try to log on, messages come back to say it's impossible. Maybe that's because The Downloader is up in his attic, looking at unsavoury images of bondage and knives, or maybe it's because I'm being watched. Journalists are.

Either way, I'm nervous about smuggling text like this past customs tomorrow when I'm due to fly home. I shall try to rig up some kind of device using my mobile phone, hoping these words reach you. If they do, yet I mysteriously disappear, for God's sake send help. I'm at the...

Sunday 11 February 20

# Gee Whiz Guys, But the White House is Small

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If you are the sort of person who gets off on Greek marbles and broken medieval cereal bowls, then there's not much point in visiting an American museum. Think: while Europe was hosting the crusades, the Americans were hunting bison.

However, I have always wanted to see the Bell X-1, the first plane to travel faster than the speed of sound, so last weekend I set out for the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC. The trip was not a complete success because the X-1 was swathed in bubble wrap and housed in a part of the museum that was closed for renovation. But never mind, I found something else.

There are those who think America is as richly diverse as Europe – they're hopelessly wrong, and Washington, DC is the worst of it. I'd never realised that it is n't actually in a state. The founding fathers felt that, if it were, the others would feel left out – and that's very noble. Except it means that residents of the capital city of the free world have no vote.

Another feature it shares with Havana and Beijing is the immense sense of civic pomposity. The downtown area is full of vast, faceless buildings set in enormous open spaces and guarded by impossibly blond secret-service agents in massive Chevy Suburbans. The pavements are marble and the policemen gleam.

Just three blocks south of Capitol Hill you find yourself in an area where 70 per cent of the population are gunmen and the other 30 per cent have been shot. Then to the west you have the dotcom zone, which is full of idiotic companies with stupid names and unintelligible mission statements. Half.formed.thought.corp: Bringing the World Closer Together.

You look at those huge mirrored office blocks and you think: 'What are you all doing in there?' The politicians will never have the answer as they all live in an area called Georgetown, which is as antiseptic and isolated from the real world as the sub-basement at a centre for research into tropical diseases.

Here, the only cannon is Pachelbel's. It was nice to find it playing in the lobby of my hotel. It made me feel safe and cosseted, but it was on in the lift and in the bookstore next door, and in the art gallery.

It was even playing in the 'authentic' Vietnamese restaurant where customers can gorge themselves on caramelised pork in a white wine jus. Now look, I've been to Saigon and in one notable restaurant I was offered 'carp soaked in fat' and 'chicken torn into pieces'. A difficult choice, so I went for the 'rather burnt rice land slug'. I have no idea what it was, but it sure as hell wasn't caramelised or served in a wine sauce.

Still, what do the Americans know about Vietnam? Well, more than they know about France, that's for sure. The next morning I ordered an 'authentic French-style country breakfast' which consisted of eggs sunny-side up, sausage links, bacon, hash browns and – here it comes – a croissant. Oh, that's all right then.

What's not all right are the people who were eating there. Every single one of them was a politician, or a politician's lapdog, or a political commentator or a political lobbyist.

Because all these people with a common interest live together in a little cocoon, they labour under the misapprehension that their work is in some way important. They begin to

believe that there are only two types of people: not black or white, not rich or poor, not American or better; just Democrat or Republican.

So what, you may be wondering, is wrong with that? Surely it's a good idea to put all the politicians together in one place, it saves the rest of us from having to look at them.

I'm not so sure. When Peter Mandelson couldn't remember whether he'd made a phone call or not he had to resign and it was treated as the most important event in world history. On the television news a man with widescreen ears explained that Tony Blair might actually delay the election, as though everyone, in every pub in the land, was talking of nothing else.

That was London. But in a town built by politicians for politicians, it's much, much worse. You can't even build skyscraper in Washington, DC, because all buildings must be smaller than the Washington Memorial. The message is simple. Nothing here is bigger than politics.

To explain that there's a world outside their window, and it's a world of dread and fear, I felt compelled to buy some spray paint and a ladder and write something appropriate in big red letters on the White House.

But when I got there I simply couldn't believe my eyes. Put simply, I live in a bigger gaff than the president of America, and that's not bragging because, chances are, you do too. It really is pathetically small.

All around there were television reporters revealing to their viewers some snippet of useless information that they had picked up the night before over a bowl of authentic Ethiopian pasta. And I wanted to say: 'Look, stick to what's important. Tell everyone that President Bush lives in a hut and, most of all, warn people that the X-1 display at the Smithsonian is closed.'

Sunday 18 February 20

# Flying Round the World, No Seat is First Class

According to recent scare stories, people on the 27-hour flight to New Zealand have a simple choice. You can either die of deep vein thrombosis or you can die of cancer which is caused by radiation in the upper atmosphere reacting with the aluminium skin of the aeroplane. Both options are better than surviving.

I boarded the plane at Heathrow and was horrified to note that I was to share my section of the cabin with a couple of dozen pensioners on a Saga holiday. Great. Half were at the stage where they'd need to go to the lavatory every fifteen minutes, and half were at the stage where they didn't bother with the lavatory at all.

But the seat next to me was free. So who am I going to get? Please God, not the girl with the baby I'd seen in the departure lounge. There is nothing worse than sitting next to a girl with a baby on a long-haul flight. I got the girl with the baby.

And then I was upgraded to first class. I didn't stop to ask why. I just took the moment by the bottom of its trouser leg, moved to the front and settled down with my book. It was a bi-fattie called *Ice Station*, which promised to be the sort of page-turning rollercoaster that would turn the fat 11-hour leg to Los Angeles into a dainty little ankle.

Sadly, it turned out to be the worst book ever written. Just after the lone American marine had wiped out an entire French division single-handed, I decided to watch a movie instead. But since I'd seen them all, in their original formats, with swearing, I was stuck.

You can't even talk to the stewardesses because they think you're trying to chat them up and you can't talk to the stewards either, for much the same reason. So I thought I'd get a drink, but of what?

My body clock said it was time for tea but I'd already moved my watch and that said I should have a glass of wine. But I couldn't have a wine because then I'd want a cigarette and you can't do that on a plane because, unlike a screaming baby, it's considered antisocial.

I know. I'll look out of the window. I'll look at this overcrowded world in which we're living. Well sorry, but for six hours there are no towns, no people and despite various claims to the contrary no evidence of global warming. Just thousands upon thousands of miles of ice.

So I went back to my book and was halfway through the bit where the lone American was busy killing everyone in the SAS, when we dropped out of the clouds and into Los Angeles.

Time for a smoke. But this being California, that meant I had to go outside, which meant I'd have to clear customs, which meant I had to get in line with the Saga louts who'd all filled their forms in wrong.

I queued for an hour while the American passport-control people, in a bad mood because work stops them eating, barked at the old biddies and then realised that time was up. Unlike everywhere else in the world, airlines in the States are allowed to take off with your bags on board.

And so with a heavy heart and even heavier lungs I trudged back to the 747 for the next, really long leg and found that my first-class seat had gone. But then so had the girl with the baby.

In her place there was a Californian beach babe who was going to Auckland with her equally volleyballish friend.

To begin with, I didn't think too much of the fact they were holding hands but as the flight wore on and they started holding rather more intimate parts of one another's bodies, the penny dropped.

I know I shouldn't have been surprised. I've been told countless times that people are born gay and that it's not something that happens because you're too much of a boiler to pull a bloke. So there must be good-looking lesbians, too. It's just that, outside films, you never see one.

I tried to read my book, in which the hero was now taking on and beating the entire US Marine Corps using nothing but a rope ladder, but it was impossible to concentrate. And you try sleeping when you're seventeen inches from two pneumatic blondes playing tonsil hockey.

Somewhere around the Fiji islands they went to sleep, and so did I, waking up an hour later when I moved my arm and the nicotine patch tore a couple of armpit hairs clean out of their sockets.

After twelve hours we landed and I had forty minutes to make my connection for Wellington which, even though the domestic terminal is a brisk fortnight's walk away, was just about doable, providing all went well in customs.

It didn't. A man took my papers into a back room and emerged ten minutes later wearing rubber gloves. I damn nearly fainted.

Believe me, you do not want an intimate body search after a 27-hour journey. You don't want an intimate body search after a 27-minute journey, come to think of it, but thankfully he limited his probing to my suitcase and I made the last flight with one minute to spare.

On it, I had another breakfast, finished my godawful book and tomorrow, after just 36 hours in Wellington, I'm coming home again. This is jet-set living? You can keep it.

Sunday 25 February 20

# They're Trying to Lower the Pulse of Real Life

Did anyone else notice that, in the aftermath of last week's train crash, the newspapers were gripped with a sense of impotent rage? Try as they might, and some of them tried very hard indeed, they couldn't find anyone to blame.

The tracks hadn't disintegrated. The train driver wasn't four. There were crash barriers on the motorway bridge and the man in the Land Rover hadn't fallen asleep. It had been an accident.

But, of course, there's no such thing as an accident these days. If you trip over a paving stone or eat a dodgy piece of meat, there will be an inquiry, someone will be culpable, and steps will be taken to ensure it doesn't happen again.

We had a very wet autumn, as I'm sure you will recall, and as a result many rivers burst their banks. But this was not an act of God or a freak of nature. This was someone's fault.

Nobody is allowed to just die, either. George Carman QC, for instance, pegged out at the age of 71, which is not a bad innings. But oh no. His death has been chalked up to cancer, as though it might have been avoided if he'd not eaten cheese and broccoli.

Well now look. The human being, and the human male in particular, is programmed to take risks. Had our ancestors spent their days sitting around in caves, not daring to go outside, we'd still be there now.

Sure, we're more civilised these days, what with our microwave ovens and our jet liners, but we're still cavemen at heart. We still crave the rush of adrenaline, the endorphin highs and the buzz of a dopamine hit. And the only way we can unlock this medicine chest is by taking a risk.

Telling us that speed kills and asking us to slow down is a bit like asking us to ignore gravity. We don't drive fast because we're in a hurry; we drive fast because it pushes the arousal buttons, makes us feel alive, makes us feel human.

Dr Peter Marsh, from the Social Issues Research Centre in Oxford, says the recent rise in popularity of bungee jumping, parachuting and other extreme sports is simply man's reaction to the safer, cotton-woolly society that's being created.

He told me this week that, when the youth of Blackbird Leys in Oxford was stealing cars and doing handbrake turns back in the 1990s, a number of liberal commentators called to ask him why.

'It's funny,' he said. 'These kids steal a really good car, take it back to their housing estate and charge around, with all their friends cheering and applauding. They are having a laugh, and making the police look like fools on television, and you have to ask why!'

Who has decided that we must live in a temperance society where there is no stimulation, no risk, no danger and no death?

In the past two months alone we've been told that water makes us mental, that coffee increases the risk of miscarriage, that lawn mowers cause deafness and that middle-aged men who dance will get 'glamrock shoulder'.

A professor at Aberdeen University described washing-up bowls as 'an absolute menace'. We were told that snooker chalk causes lead poisoning and that the new euro coins contain

nickel, which will blister skin. There were warnings too that apples cause *E-coli* and that mercury thermometers kill babies.

So where is all this rubbish coming from? Well, to be honest, it's being imported from America, where scientists are now worried that a consignment of Play-Stations that has been sent to Iraq could be linked to form a crude supercomputer. This, they say, could then be used to pilot a chemical warhead all the way to Buffalo Springs.

Americans, remember, have got it into their heads that you can now wage a war without losing a single soldier or airman, and we see the same sort of thing with their weather too.

Instead of shrugging when a hurricane marches across Florida, or a tornado tears up Oklahoma, they insist that the government does something about it. They want more warning, better protection.

Then of course there is the business of smoking.

Did you know that there are now porno websites in America where you can call up pictures of girls with farmyard animals, and then, at the highest level, for members only, pictures of fully clothed girls enjoying a cigarette?

And despite a few plaintive cries for help from the back of the *Washington Post*, the public over there seems to have bought into this belief that life can, and should, be run without risk that all accidents are avoidable, and that death is something that only happens to people who eat meat and smoke.

This is odd. From the outside, Americans appear to be human – a little larger than normal, perhaps – but equipped nevertheless with arms and heads.

So how come they are able to overcome the base instincts that drive the rest of mankind?

I can think of only one answer. If they do not need risk and stimulation, they must be genetically malformed. There's a simpler word for this. They must be mad.

Sunday 4 March 20



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