

counter culture

Running the gauntlet of jaded airline staff and refraining from telling knock-knock jokes to immigration officers is just part of travel's rich tapestry, says Sally Feldman

I love a sunburnt airport, a land of swooping planes. Any airport – be it the cute lawn-clad one with sea views on Lord Howe Island or the squeaky-clean, sprawling clamour of Singapore's Changi, where even the carpet edges get shaved with clippers should they dare to get out of hand, and you can sit on a chair that will rub your feet and calves without you having to make small talk with it.

Airports are great – it's just what you have to go through before you can enjoy them. That point when you can finally choose which of those gaudy cafes you'll get ripped off by, or set about the task of buying more perfume and moisturiser than you could possibly consume in a lifetime, merely because you've cleared your credit card.

First, it's the sense of relief after the goodbyes are over – of differing dramatic nuance depending on whether you're bidding tear-soaked farewells to loved ones or hastily pecking your resident homebody and dog-sitter on the cheek at that two-second drop-off point.

Another second, and that short guy in the too-big uniform will shoot out your tyres.

Of course, business or first class are the *only* ways to travel

(just to feel those red-rimmed, economy-class eyes boring into our backs as we sashay up the red carpet to check in our matching luggage, eh girls?). The only way that is, unless you're under 150cm and blessed with chronic narcolepsy. But if, for some crazy reason (such as depleted frequent-flyer points or being self-employed), this isn't the (Vuitton) case, then there's nothing for it but to resign yourself to that gloomy, *Metropolis*-like shuffle, as you inch your way towards the check-in counter, praying for the 'customer service provider' who looks least like an axe murderer.

Ah, the ignominy of the dead-eyed check-in chick (of either sex), to whom you will lose a few years of

your life and your travel composure wrangling for an aisle seat, despite having requested it when you booked six months ago. We're just putty in their hands. Perhaps it's the look some of us get when we realise our precious airport downtime is running out because we had to help reinflate the car tyres before our partner could drive home.

People get a certain look at airports. I know, because I've gazed deep into their eyes and seen mine staring back. It's a distracted, haunted demeanour that comes from squinting frantically and repeatedly at too-small, too-high screens to find the boarding gate, which, as one of life's givens, will be 10 minutes too far for comfort.

Not that I'm ever late. Hell no. I almost live close enough to the airport to walk there with a trolley like the family in *The Castle*. It would certainly save on tyre repairs.

Once you've stood in front of Immigration Guy, vainly trying not to look as shifty as your passport photo, and the contents of your carry-on luggage have been X-rayed (lord knows how they work out

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what's on those screens – my hand luggage always looks like the stomach contents of a great white shark to me), the departure cloud miraculously clears and you almost skip into transit nirvana.

Forget those luxe, fragrant 'club' lounges, with their serried ranks of crustless ham sandwiches and suits clutching their electronic fruit *du jour*, I'd rather find an unstained chair (rare but possible) and share the warm community of anxious travellers like me rummaging obsessive-compulsively in their hand luggage as they search for papers, purses and powder compacts that they rearranged just 30 seconds ago, their eyes feverishly scanning the board for delays, gate changes or the rest of their mysteriously absent family. And I'd rather play the tannoy game with everyone else – straining my ears to catch unintelligible last-calls and matching them with that no-longer-anonymous 'Passenger Strhmrsxlscsh' making a wild-eyed dash for the gate.

Best of all is travel-couture reviewing, for which I'd gladly pay an airline ticket without going anywhere: the unbearable brightness of aqua tracksuits, for example, and the eternal mystery of how those hyper-groomed über-travellers can wear white linen throughout a long-haul flight without squirting Neil Perry's vinaigrette all over themselves.

And that's another story entirely – the on-board games, like mocking the mile-high yogis doing their downward dogs while we dilettantes get stuck into the chardonnay and re-runs of Fashion TV. **VE+T**

