

Despite all the economic problems, holiday travel this year is expected to be just about as crowded and confusing as ever. It's sure to be a hassle for all of us, especially while flying, and maybe there are ways to make it a bit less tiresome. Here are some tips.

We often go red eye, the flights from 10 pm on. It's cheaper, better onboard seating is available and airports are much less crowded. Most important, we find ways to sleep during our flights. Our most frequent trips, about once a month, are one-hour flights between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. We also take six-hour flights cross country several times a year, and about once a year we do the eight-hour-plus air journey to Europe or South America.

The best sleep aid, of course, is to book a higher-class seat that folds down to a bed. However, they cost twice as much as a tourist seat or more. As tourists on a red eye, we often find empty seats. That allows stretching out on a two-across seat by removing arm rests, and if you're very lucky, you can do it more comfy on a three- or five-across seat. If all else fails, get your tourist class seat back as far as it will go, and do the best you can.

Once you're settled, click out the overhead light. Murphy's Law may determine that there will be some nerd nearby who wants to read all night. Take along a sleep mask. I always travel with a cheap kid's black mask with eye holes taped up. I get some funny looks from airport security, but never had any trouble.

Today's laptop computers can help pass the flying hours away. If you need to work on business, correspond, surf the internet, play games or watch movies, the magic little box will do it all. If you prefer the spicier stuff, just make sure the grandma in the next seat can't see you doing it.

If music helps, take along one of those miraculous little listening and/or video devices. If you still have your old-fashioned small tape or CD player and some of your own music tapes or discs, bring them. I often take along books on tape or CD, and read myself to sleep by ear. Your local library or a subscription service is available to get both older books and the latest murder mysteries and Hollywood tell-all books on tape you've been meaning to read.

To snooze undisturbed during your flight, eat and drink very lightly before boarding. A bit of booze can help you get to sleep. When I can't sleep at any time, a short shot of brandy is more effective than any sleeping pill. It works wonders when I'm flying a late, late night red eye or a loooong ocean-crossing flights.

In general, if possible, go aboard your flight when your body is ready to get some shut-eye and/or some personal entertainment. Get comfy and have yourself some happy dreams.