

A Day in the Life of a Flight Attendant

By David Silverstein

A day on the job. For a flight attendant that could mean...a trip to Paris...or an emergency landing. It can be fun, an adventure, or both...but is it work? I've found that working for a major airline this past year has been one of the hardest jobs I have ever had, and yet one of the most enjoyable. The schedule and the passengers challenge me in ways I never could have imagined. But nothing beats hanging out in Las Vegas for 24 hours with a company-paid hotel room and expense money. The thousands of us flying encounter many different experiences during the course of a day. This is a day (well, technically a trip) in my life...

5:45 P.M. Friday: The Assignment

In the airline industry, seniority rules. Mechanics, pilots, flight attendants, customer service agents--all of these employees enjoy pay rates, schedules and benefits based on their length of service with the company. Among flight attendants, seniority determines status as a lineholder or reserve. Lineholders have a flying schedule set at least one month in advance; they know when and where they will work and on what types of aircraft. The airlines use reserves to fill open flying time and to cover positions vacated by lineholders calling in sick or on holiday. If you are a relatively new flight attendant, like me, you can expect to sit reserve for a couple of years. Flight attendants often receive a set schedule (known as a block) after less than two years, but at some bases, flight attendants can sit reserve for more than ten years.

As a reserve flight attendant, my "work day" begins with a call from a crew scheduler. Each airline operates differently; at mine, schedulers call reserves on-duty to ask what trips they want to fly the following day. Trips are paid by the flight hour, from the time the aircraft door is shut to the time it is opened. And for every hour away from base, flight attendants are paid expense money. This particular Friday evening, when crew scheduling calls, I choose a four-day trip on the Airbus 319--one of our newer aircraft. It pays better than average and overnights in Raleigh-Durham, Washington, DC and Denver. Working what the airline labels the "C" position, I serve in the economy cabin and sit in the front, near the boarding door. With my trip set, I pack. I take a few extra pieces of my uniform and some clothes for the overnight. I go to bed early since I must check in early the next morning.

7:30 A.M. Saturday: Check-in

This morning, I go down to the crew room below the airport concourse in Philadelphia. Each base has a crew room complete with couches, computers and supervisors' offices. Pilots and flight attendants also have boxes or folders there for company mail. Before starting a trip, a crewmember must check in for it. First things first, I use the computer to sign in for the trip. If you do not sign in an hour before the trip departs, you are liable to get written up by your supervisor. Since boarding begins 30 minutes prior to departure, there's not much time to spend in the crew room, but I have a few minutes to check my box for memos and chat with friends. I head to the plane to meet up with the rest of the crew.

Communication between the cockpit and the cabin plays a vital role in maintaining a safe environment, and the crew briefings at the beginning of a trip set the tone. Once on the airplane, Becky, the lead flight attendant, briefs Mike and me on safety procedures, delegates announcement responsibilities and confirms that we have our emergency manuals. Afterward, the captain conducts his briefing, reviewing safety-related issues, flight time, weather, and what he likes to drink.

Ready, Set, Go: Inflight

About 30 minutes prior to departure, the agent working our flight comes down the jetway to begin boarding. Becky nods okay, and we finish checking our emergency equipment and catering supplies. From the forward galley, Becky and I greet the passengers and prepare drinks for first class customers. Mike hangs out in the back, monitoring the dwindling space in the overhead bins. Boarding tends to provide the biggest headache, especially considering I do not get paid until that door is shut. With a nearly full flight, it is pretty much guaranteed that space in the overhead bins will go quickly. Tensions mount, but bags need to be checked. Though the company no longer requires passenger counts, many pilots prefer to have them. When you see the flight attendant slowly coming up the aisle silently moving his or her lips, sometimes motioning his or her hands, that flight attendant is taking a count. As easy as it may seem, it often takes more than one count to get it right.

Once all the overhead bins are shut and the passengers are seated, the flight is ready for departure. I verify that the passengers seated in the window exit row are willing and able to assist in an emergency if necessary. Before shutting the door, the agent hands Becky a copy of the manifest, which lists first class passengers, passengers with special needs or meals, and gate connections. We arm the exits, enabling the slides to inflate if the doors are opened. After the safety video and a final cabin walk-through, the three of us strap into our jump seats and I practice my 30-second review, which includes evacuation commands and door operation procedures. It is still a thrill when we taxi onto the runway and the engines roar. You learn to recognize the strange (and initially scary) noises as just the lavatory toilet seat coming down or unused hangars banging in the closet.

Once we level-off at 10,000 ft, I head to the back and help Mike prepare for the breakfast service. To no one's surprise, we serve the staple of the skies: omelettes and French toast. In the back galley, we brew coffee, cook the meals in the ovens and set up the carts. Since the beverage cart comes stocked with cans of sodas and juices, we just add a few things on top such as some cream and sugar for the coffee. Once the meals finish cooking, we begin serving from the front of the cabin to the back. It turns out we are short a few meals and have to ask the company employees traveling on the flight to go without a breakfast. I hate doing that, but they do not seem to mind. Space is undeniably tight on the beverage cart, and accidents are bound to happen. I am no exception on this leg, knocking a can of soda on a passenger as I reach for it. Not much spills, but he is still peeved. I give him a sorry form to get his pants dry-cleaned at the airline's expense. Finishing the service, I settle in the back row with a book, assisting in the cabin as needed. Passengers occasionally bring cups and other trash back for me to dispose of as they head to the toilet, but the remainder of the long flight is a coffee break of sorts for us.

Service in first class is usually more involved. With 12 or fewer passengers on the smaller jets, it also tends to be more intimate. No carts are needed, and food and beverages are presented in china and glassware. Various types of people fly first class, but that cabin mostly fills up with business people and other frequent flyers. Celebrities occasionally make an appearance. A friend served Sissy Spacek once, and another flew with the members of the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

During the flight, a problem arises, which is relatively common on longer flights. Sitting in the back, I notice the smell of cigarette smoke coming from the lavatory. A passenger exits and it is obvious he has been smoking. There is no sign of the cigarette in the trash, but I advise him that smoking in the lavatory is a violation of a federal law and comes with a large fine. There are set procedures to deal with situations like these and paperwork to complete.

We cruise through the rest of the day with little problem, except when I smash Mike's finger in the overhead bin as we both try to close it. He's okay, though he is quick to point out the tiny white scratch on his fingernail. An extra flight attendant joins us in Denver for our next leg to Charlotte. She notices a pregnant woman sitting in the exit row, and the four of us discuss whether the passenger is qualified to do so. Since no regulation explicitly excludes pregnant women from those seats and the passenger insists she is both willing and able to assist in an emergency, we decide to let her stay there. The last leg of the day is the easiest. Since the airline needs us in Raleigh-Durham, but does not need us to work from Charlotte, we deadhead on another crew's flight.

Gas, Food, Lodging: The Layover

We arrive in Raleigh-Durham at 8:00 P.M. I take Mike and Becky to the restaurant where I once waited tables. My old boss gives us dinner on the house, certainly a welcome treat on our first-year salary. We have an early start again the next morning and there is not a whole lot to do near the airport in Durham, so we don't stay out late.

On an overnight, the airline provides each crewmember with his or her own hotel room. Long layovers (at least 15 hours off) land you at a decent hotel downtown, near the beach or some sort of shopping venue. For shorter layovers, you will usually stay at or very near the airport. My crew, both the pilots and the flight attendants, stay together the entire trip--layover and all. Some airlines work a little differently, putting flight attendants and pilots in separate hotels. The airline also covers meals, if you count the expense money paid for the trip.

12:40 P.M. Tuesday: Check-out

The next few days of the trip are surprisingly uneventful. The video system on the Airbus, sophisticated as it is with its automatic preprogramming, occasionally malfunctions. Threatened with having to do the safety demo the "old-fashioned way," we manage to play the video manually. At the end of day two, as the plane pulls off the runway at National Airport in D.C., I persuade Becky to spice up the arrival announcement. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our nation's capital," she says, instead of the scripted "Welcome to Washington, DC." I cannot tell if anyone notices. By the end of the fourth day, most of the giddiness has been replaced with exhaustion.

At the end of the last leg, we land in Philadelphia. The trip is now over. I am released from duty 15 minutes later. This rest period lasts at least eight hours and is guaranteed to be free from phone contact from schedulers. Leaving the airport, I head out to the employee parking lot, pick up my car and head home. Back in my room, I unload my bags and unplug the phone.

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