

Articles

"Hazards of Being a Female Flier"

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I'm not one to harp on the intrinsic, gender-based unfairnesses in life. Our mantra should be, "Quit whining, and find a way to overcome." But I do allow myself one beef with the male-dominated world: It's harder, and always will be harder, for women to travel on business.

Let's start with packing. Men have a list of maybe six essentials for travel: shaving gear, toothbrush, underwear, tie, socks and clean shirt. Maybe they need to bring casual clothes (khakis and a polo shirt) and a spare suit. The end. All of that can fit neatly into the small version of one of those ubiquitous rolling suitcases.

Women, even the most low-maintenance of our kind, need easily two or three times that amount of gear. Our heads alone require significant packing space, what with hair accoutrements and cosmetics. And please spare me the "Women don't have to fix their hair or wear makeup" diatribes. Ben & Jerry's is probably the only company where a woman could get away with going to a business meeting with air-dried hair and no makeup.

And society has thus far not allowed women (nor do women particularly want) to have an office "uniform," as men have. We, therefore, have to find clothes that both travel well (i.e., are wrinkle-resistant) and are presentable. And we have to pack more of them than men do. Then there's the dazzling array of undergarments women must wear, which we won't go into.

What's Business Casual?

And business casual, for all of its press, hasn't helped much here. For men, it's khakis and a polo. I have no idea what it means for women these days. The transition to evening wear is also more difficult for women. If a man shows up at a cocktail party wearing the same suit he wore to a business meeting that day, nobody has a second thought. If a woman wears a business suit to an evening soiree, she can come across as stern, frumpy or just inappropriate. Which all adds up to more stuff to pack.

Once we manage to pack all of that, it rarely fits into the convenient rolling thingie. I usually opt for a soft-sided shoulder bag, though even that's not ideal. I find garment bags to be too bulky, in addition to the fact that they are usually too short to accommodate a dress.

Many women swear by those collapsible metal luggage carts, even though they mean an additional item to bring on-board. And, believe me, you are responsible for carrying your own bags. Either because of concern that they'd offend you or total obliviousness to your plight, your male colleagues will rarely think to offer to carry your bags (and unlike husbands, or significant others, you can't ask them to).

It should go without saying that business travelers (particularly men) must never, ever check their bags. Although there are some legitimate reasons for this, absent the most unusual circumstances, it's just not done. With the new "strictly enforced" carry-on rules, it remains to be seen whether that will change.

And you mustn't forget the briefcases, laptops and other business paraphernalia that needs to be toted along.

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On top of all that, I'm always flummoxed by what to wear on the plane. Office attire is typically a suit or business-appropriate dress. And I was OK with that, until I saw a TV special on airplane safety, where the host deeply intoned about the flammability of pantyhose and the danger of high heels in the event of a crash landing. The thought of my legs bursting into flames leaves me in a less-than-businesslike frame of mind.

So if your firm or client is amenable, I'd recommend a pantsuit with low-heeled shoes. At least one of us should make it out of an air disaster alive.