

11SHORT.DOC 11-11-04

Nowadays, frequent flyer awards rank with the hard-pressed airline industry somewhere in the priority range between blue blazer buttons lost in the seats and baby rattlers left in the terminals. Against wishes and will, American Airlines books frequent flyers on arrivals only acceptable to incurable insomniacs and hardcore cat burglars.

At such ungodly hours, the only guys around the terminals wield brooms or push mops. Have to be sure of foot to drag a roll-a-board across wet tile slick with soapsuds. Travel shoes need to be shod in snow tread to travel frequent flyer style, unless ice skating or high wire acts are your profession.

On a trip to Philadelphia last month, we spent so long flying from San Angelo that my pal and I considered calling back home at landing to see if cattle numbers had changed nationwide while we were aloft. Fortunately, we booked space at a bed and breakfast, as arriving at a hotel in such a disheveled state in the dead of night might cause a desk clerk to alert the security people.

The fellow running the bed and breakfast was a good sport. Heated tea water and offered to serve breakfast later than usual. Skipped the introductory speech. He also

postponed settlement of the bill until the next morning.

(More and more inns charge the full amount of the stay upon arrival. A growing number accept personal checks or cash to avoid the three or four percent drag by the credit card companies.)

Our room belonged to the absentee owner – a chap who travels the world to buy art objects. He collects booty in piles that'd make museum buyers envious. Every article from the tassels on the fine scrolled lamp bases to rich tapestries and beaded pillows exuded the air of a precious collection by a professional decorator. Paintings and watercolors leaned stacked against and above the baseboards. Last time I had seen so much marble top was in an old hotel in Louisville.

The bathroom not only continued the marvels in soft colors and soft textures, but held a computerized scale capable of measuring the mass of body fat in percentages. After reading the directions, and learning my age group should measure 35 percent, I activated the device with my toe balanced on the scale plate. Activate is right. I set off flashing red signals reading, "Avoid open flame; Seek medical attention."

Stunned by the instrument's warnings, I launched a Spartan diet for breakfast the next morning. Declined

bagels spread on both sides with cream cheese for single side servings. Selected lean slices of bacon draining on the edges of the platter. Specified poached eggs brushed in Hollandaise sauce instead of floating in Hollandaise sauce. Used lower caloric brown sugar instead of white sugar on my oatmeal. Was careful to slosh the correct amount of cream on my cereal to avoid solidifying the melted butter into a ball of fat.

The new diet failed to change the scale's reading. Stepped on after breakfast expecting a reprieve, only to hear three harsh beeps and face flashing red letters reading, "Warning: ride freight elevators," and a puzzler: "Use the motorman's turnstile on subway."

We spent our first morning calling for reservations for concerts and flexing our arms and legs to regain dexterity and mobility from coach class paralysis. Chose the Museum of Fine Arts to spend the rainy afternoon and adjust to our new quarters.

I'd better explain that my art appreciation developed slowly, coming from a country school where baking soda company cards and a contest called "Picture Memory" were the whole curriculum. If it took as long to polish hard coal into gems as it did to convert a 1930-model ranch ruffian to strolling through a Philadelphia art collection,

the South African Dutch diamond mining DeBeers family would had to have gone back to Holland to sell tulip bulbs.

During breaks at the museum, I stared through the thin rivulets of rainwater dripping down the huge windows overlooking the tree-lined boulevards of a city wanting to reach European elegance. Made a guess that if Philadelphia was going to be as sophisticated as Paris, the ball fans were going to have to be tamed like the Depression-era rowdies had to be broke to sit still in a schoolhouse by administering the edge of an oak yardstick. (Don't put a tracer on this one. I don't watch baseball, I just know the odds of the fans misbehaving are high.)

Smallest reading on the scales the whole trip ran 41 percent body fat mass. The other 59 percent, I suppose, was bone and gristle. Every bit of the trouble traced to riding an airliner at indecent hours without decent food. Good thing the cream cheese on the bagels was fat-free, or I would have set off an alarm.