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Roundtrip airfare from Miami to Johannesburg, South Africa, coach class cost \$1350 in May. First class ran over five thousand bucks. I was plenty money-conscious, as I just finished a hard winter at the ranch and was headed for Southern Africa where winter was just starting.

The flight takes 17 or 18 hours. South African Airways also flies from New York direct to Johannesburg. But coming from Texas, a terminal change from La Guardia to JFK adds a couple of hours to the trip. Not to mention the extra stress involved in transferring luggage onto a crowded airport shuttle to take a wild ride across a town full of shouting cabbies and blue-coated policemen blowing whistles as shrill as the street cleaners' steel brushes grating against the curbs.

Using an estimate of 34 hours round trip flight time from Miami, an opulent first class ride cost \$165 an hour and a cramped coach seat cost \$45 an hour. After completing the calculation, I measured off the same size legroom at the kitchen table as I'd have on the airplane. Next, I drew my heels up against the legs of the chair. Once my feet numbed from being immobile, I addressed the overflow of my belt line to be 4.5 inches into the aisle to estimate how much free space to expect. Here, I recalled reading in a travel magazine, opening the lid to the ashtray made more room. So wherever I ended my calculations, the figures were going to

be off a critical one-half inch because of the unsettled ashtray question.

Coach seats are 20 inches wide on most airlines. And international flights can not be approved for takeoff unless 50 percent of the passengers' knees in coach wedge into the seat back in front of them deep enough to strike the next person in the small of the back. However, I was fooling myself thinking I had a choice. If I'd had to ship my old cows to grass in South Africa, I'd have bought the best berth possible. But after balancing the 120 bucks an hour more for first class against how many miles I'd ridden in pickups or on horseback for 20 cents an hour, I booked a coach seat and stepped up my back exercises.

Boarding passes aren't issued ahead of check-in time on international flights. Makes choosing a seat a hard decision and a big gamble. For one thing, 50 percent of us in America are overweight and the rest of us are fast on the way to being over-finished. Guys such as myself need to be seated next to lightweight protesters coming off a hunger strike and not on the same row assigned a heavyweight wrestling team. After I boarded the flight out of Miami, I covered my face underneath two blankets, refusing to face what might waddle down the aisle to sprawl over me for the next 17 hours.

My luck was good. The middle seat stayed empty the whole flight. Also, the dreadnought of all long trips, a young mother and babe, became strangely quiet. The lady

cradled the child close by in a crib hung under the movie screen. The kid was just the right age for the lungpower to cry for the next 8000 miles. But a retired naval officer wearing a handlebar mustache saved the night by keeping the kid amused in his waking hours by leaning over the edge of the basket and mewling "kitchie-kitchie-coo," just like a harbor seal. I never thought I'd feel such fondness for old sailors, or harbor seals. He claimed to be going to Africa to hunt big game, but as soothing as his waxed lip piece was to babies, if the lion cubs were as charmed by his mustache as the lady's baby, he was going to have to shoot his way out of trouble.

After we landed in Cape Town, customs regulations kept us on the plane. So I went up front and talked to the captain. When he learned I was from Texas, he warned how much more dangerous crocodiles are than in the pictures safari outfits send to the States. He cautioned about standing too close to riverbanks, or floating about in canoes. I realized 'ol Cap felt a strong obligation to protect Texans and rubes, not that there's a whole lot of difference between the two.

The final leg from Cape Town to Johannesburg took an hour and 55 minutes. Passing through customs lasted long enough to stamp a passport page. The hotel van whisked us down a modern freeway, much like in the States. An electric gate opened to enter the hotel compound. We weren't told who the formidable fence and gate turned away. Jet-lag travelers

ask questions, but few have the attention span left to wait for the answer.