

Amusement on a Long Flight Alone

by Norman Berdichevsky (January 2014)

If you're like me and are not adept at packing suitcases and hand luggage, a long flight can be excruciatingly boring if you've put all your usual recreational educational time-killer devices, books, magazines, ipod, laptop or desk calendar away, out of reach, and your airline has cut back on everything from earphones, meals, blankets and newspapers along with on-board luggage capacity.

If your social skills fail to engage an inquisitive fellow traveler, and you are alone, sitting separately from your spouse or significant other and thrown back entirely on the mercies of your own mental resources but are not a chess master on the level of Nathan Sharansky who whiled away countless months and years in a Soviet gulag cell as the principal Refusenick, there is still one alternative as I discovered on a recent long eight hour flight from Orlando to Las Vegas (with a stopover in Los Angeles – adding insult to injury). I also know this from trying the Sharansky technique but always quickly lost interest because I repeatedly caught myself cheating.

The only matter worthy of intellectual stimulation lay within hand's reach in the pocket of the seat in front of me – the ubiquitous SKY MALL catalogue of mail order goods, provided free by almost all the airlines and upon which they have printed in huge letters TAKE IT – IT'S FREE – WE'LL REPLACE IT! After thus soothing my conscience that I was not doing something illegal, I began to carefully peruse the brochure and made copious notes. Although initially begun as last resort, I quickly found interest building as I leafed through the catalogue, absorbed by the many items advertised in the Christmas spirit of giving gifts, all of items obtainable by mail order and not available in most stores (or any stores). The items run the gamut from the sublime to the ridiculous. I immediately began to speculate who would want such things? Who would give them as gifts for the Holiday season? I wracked my brain to try and recall where I had seen similar goods advertised before and the closest memory of recall I could summon up was of my disappointment as a pre-teen ordering "exotic stuff" for the price of a few box tops of a breakfast cereal like the submarine that you could propel in your bathtub that ran on detergent. Many of the ads openly boasted that you certainly had "never seen anything similar in any shop."

I was determined to examine the catalogue carefully and almost immediately was forced to qualify my initial skepticism as there were indeed several items that immediately appealed to me and my sense of the curious rather than the vision of utterly banal, ludicrous junk for either the idle rich or the lowest common denominator of mass consumption. The provocative question that continued to dance in my mind for most of the rest of the flight interrupted by a welcome meal that was the only break in the smooth flight and utter boredom of a huge piece of metal hurtling through the air at speed of 585 miles per hours, a height of 30,000 feet and minus 65 degrees.

Who would want, need or resort to acquiring such items for what purposes to keep as outright possessions or to give as gifts? What made it all the more confusing was the back cover which featured a full page ad of a reputable and highly praised educational tool – The Rosetta Stone Language Program series of dvds – as a multi-linguist frequently critical in much of my written work concerning monolingual Americans and their general ignorance of foreign languages and geography, I could most wholeheartedly agree with the ad by Rosetta stone that in addition to its noble goal, “it cures boredom on long flights”. What a perfect introduction to the catalogue, or so I thought until I opened it and my eyes rested on the first ad I saw in the lower left corner of page one titled with huge capital letters NEW! and featuring for either your desk top, parlor or backyard (perhaps front yard too where not against local ordinances) your own Abominable Snowman Yeti statue in three sizes .

As with all the local cafes that feature exotic coffee drinks, there was no “small” size. The smallest available is the medium size at 21”H x 12 ½” W x 12” D and weighing in at 9 lbs. The large size measures 28 ½ “ x 19 ½” x 16” and weighs 12 lbs. It sells for \$125, quite a savings if we measure the price per pound, as the medium size costs \$99.95. BUT hold your horses – there is a LIFE SIZE version 72” x 45” x 38” that weighs 147 lbs and is a huge savings at the bargain price of \$2,350.00 (includes curbside delivery). From that moment, I made it a life-long challenge to myself in driving throughout the country to search for a home where the life size abominable snowman might be found. Does the owner believe it might be able to fool visitors like a modern day Kensington Runestone, Cardiff Gant, Piltdown Man or Hitler’s Diary? The ad makes the following appeal...*“You’ll show the world that a reclusive, mythical, hairy creature DOES inhabit the planet when you position our ape-like Bigfoot as innovative garden décor, unique holiday decoration or as an office mascot”!*

In spite of all the hype, Bigfoot appears to have a rather benign expression and unlikely to scare anyone so I think most horror fans would be much better off with any one of a dozen dinosaur-like statues or just a moving alligator replica if they really would like to scare the neighbors in Florida where I live. In the course of just under half an hour I began to

find items that actually did amaze, delight and intrigue me so I kept the catalogue and took it home with me, bent on doing more serious research although chastened by my experience as a pre-teenager that apart from the bathtub submarine which I really liked, anything ordered through the mail was a disappointment and fell far short of the attractive ads.

By meal time, I had begun to rank the top and bottom three items in terms from most absurd-ridiculous-banal to most intriguing-beautiful-charming-innovative-useful and decided to invite readers to get the Sky Mall catalogue and compare notes. Clearly, the rankings will reflect personal tastes, experience, interests, fancies-life style and only peripherally the issue of "need" (I don't need any of them).

Whether one is or isn't a lover of domestic animals as pets will figure very significantly in the choice of best and worst. As I have never had a house pet (only a canary and a turtle both of whom died at relatively young ages), I realize that my choice for most absurd may offend pet lovers. Coming in at the number one position for most absurd, I chose the ad labeled "Custom Pet Portrait" on page 153. This service affords you the possibility of transposing a portrait you provide of your dog or cat or who knows what on to the body and stylish dress of a historic period – Roman, Gothic, Renaissance, Roaring Twenties in any dramatic pose– you name it.

A close second is titled "For the Die Hard Yankee Fan" (page 143) and is an "authentic old Yankee Stadium seat bottom" (with brand new arms and legs bearing the Yankee logo), so you can share the warmth left there by at least a million fans over the 90 years the stadium was in use and thus must have witnessed many historic plays. Such is the intensity of American baseball madness for memorabilia! You get a certificate of authenticity plus a major league baseball signed by Yankee star Derek Jeter (who holds the current major league baseball record for most money earned from endorsements) at no extra cost all included for the bargain price of \$699.99! Note – only limited quantities available. Just for the record – if these are the cheap bleacher seats I may have sat in one as a youngster although I disliked the Yankees then because it seemed their success was based on buying all the best talent when they were most successful.

Of course there should also be a most honorable mention for specific categories – the one I feel must be mentioned for "most snob appeal" is the Winston Churchill Wristwatch (page 65), awarded by General Charles de Gaulle (who disliked Churchill intensely) in 1948 for "service to France" and created by the original LIP manufacturer but who would know what you were wearing? There is no identifying marker of any kind so not even the greatest historian but only two or three trivia addicts in the world would recognize the appearance of this famous

"T-18" watch (splash resistant, Swiss quartz movement, and dark brown leather strap) for only \$249.95

When we come to the "Best category, the choice is much more nuanced and sophisticated and it was no easy choice – I had to wait actually to go through the entire catalogue during the month following my return home from the flight. I will give my selections in reverse order starting with the third best item, (to build suspense, and should be accompanied at home by a drum roll).

In third place is a "luggage tracker" (p. 118) that signals you when your piece of luggage is within a radius of 160 feet and, even more remarkably, like a GPS, will even inform you – where in the world it is at any given moment. Based on the long term experience I have had with misplaced and delayed luggage, usually having to wait until the very last moment of the conveyor belt revolutions, this device would be a God-send. The price is a modest \$49.95

In second place is a device I decided on based on the recommendation of my son who could verify it actually works. Is it is a "spinner" (p.20) for hand, wrist and forearm training to develop and shape the grip and avoid the more and more common habit of dropping things as well as getting rid of extra flab. It is compact held in the hand, is not competitive, does not need any room and allows you to track your progress with a digital counter. Having just turned 70, I decided I should "do something" as far as physical training apart from walking and swimming. The basic model only costs \$54.99

As for number one, in its simplicity, utility and practical appeal with enormous benefits to everyone. When I read it, I asked myself why it has not already been required by law and what has prevented its universal adoption. It is a "simple" mirror that eliminates the "notorious blind spot" from the driver's field of vision in the rear view mirror (p.65). How many "close calls" have you had dear reader with a passing vehicle in the blind spot? According to the ad, this device is used by professional racecar drivers and police officers and simply clamps on to your existing rear-view mirror without tools. Its 180 degree field of vision is three times that of a standard mirror. The price is \$59.95.

Well, I consider the many hours spent reviewing the Sky Mall entertaining, educational, and a practical solution to what to do when all alone on a long flight without the usual time-killing aids but as you can imagine, it is only good for one time only (or until the next issue when American ingenuity is bound to come up with ever more imaginative and wonderful products).

Norman Berdichevsky's latest book is