

Expensive at Half the Price

by [G. Murphy Donovan](#) (January 2019)



The Waiting Room, Serban Savu, 2016

Many things are dear, especially truth in matters economic.

I took my nephew clamming at the beach a few summers back. Lacking a rake, we went to the local hardware store and purchased a “Made in China” clam digger, the only option available. On the first pull through wet sand, the claw snapped off at the ferule. The metal, not the wood, gave way on the first try.

Surely, the mollusks were amused.

Our clam jam was redeemed by an old American-made potato fork found at a second-hand store. The difference between inexpensive and cheap seems to be a distinction without a difference today.

Few hand tools are manufactured in America anymore. Makes you wonder about quality control at the upper end of the industrial spectrum. Aircraft or computer parts for example. False economies are now a slick slope in many industries. Three examples make the cut here; automobiles, housing, and travel.

Illusions about Automobiles

Take the Tesla as an illustration, a swell example of noble intentions undone by hard facts. Reality on the road, not fossil fuel, is a terrible thing to waste. Putting aside the quirks of Elon Musk, the Tesla experiment, to date, is a no-profit environmental chimera. Battery operated delusions are manifest; things like limited range, scarce charging stations, exhaustive, if not digressive trip planning, and chronic mendacity about real costs.

Electric charging stations, especially for massive car batteries, still require an infrastructure of costly fossil fuel plants. In turn, those massive batteries must be replaced at a premium, to say nothing about the cost of disposal for the toxic cadavers. The killer irony is cumulative, paying

thrice for the same vehicle—pricey sticker, battery replacement, and those generous state subsidies.

The taxpaying chump who roller skates to work is paying, in part, for the moral superiority of well-heeled, upwardly mobile, ecological progressives motoring quietly around town in pricey Teslas.

To date, the Tesla is a trendy indulgence. Not unlike the D battery dry-cell dildo, the electric automobile caters to a fantasy demographic. No surprise then to hear that General Motors is closing the Chevrolet Volt plant.

Unlike the politicized consumer, the marketplace has a way of accommodating the wisdom of pragmatic crowds.

Nevertheless, automobiles and private homes are still the two pillars of the American dream. Alas, housing is another big buy shot through with fantasy. A drive through any trailer park or contemporary housing development after a storm is the kind of reality therapy to which zoning boards, developers, and homeowners alike have become inured.

Mortgage fraud is only an entry-level hazard for home owning day dreamers.

Homeowner Blues

America has more hurricanes and tornadoes than any other country on earth. Meteorologically, America might be Mother Nature's whipping boy.

Empty mobile home pads and the ubiquitous blue tarps on single family roofs are testimonies to consumer folly. \$100,000 mobile homes blow over or away in high winds just as surely as 500k single family dwellings lose their inexpensive asphalt roofs. The villain here is not weather. The true culprits are buyer apathy and lax zoning codes. Incredibly, mobile homes and cheap roofs are endemic to inland tornado alleys and costal hurricane zones alike.

If Mother Nature has America in the crosshairs, God has those trailer parks at ground zero.

There are at least a dozen roofing options, on a sliding scale, for any single family dwelling. Quality of materials and ease of installation offer a range of choices from slate to asphalt shingle. Here the interests of customer and developer are at loggerheads. The consumer seeks safety and durability whilst the developer seeks the cheapest, usually unskilled, labor and shabbiest materials. These interests collide in every trailer park and on the roofs of most American homes.

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Asphalt tiles are designed to fail eventually. A cheap roof is the gift that keeps on giving to builders and roofers—and a perennial nightmare in waiting for any buyer, home, or its contents.

It's possible to anchor a mobile home or equip a free-standing home with a wind proof roof. The absence of such prudence lies at the feet of feckless buyers. Purchasing a 500k home with an asphalt tile roof is a little like flooding your basement to make a swimming pool.

Travel Follies

Beyond automobiles and housing, vacation travel might be the third most expensive cost illusion. So-called "discount" airlines are featured here.

Last November, my wife and I decided to trek down the left coast by train, flying first to Portland. Unfortunately, we were stuck four hours on-board at the gate, on the east coast, thus missing connections mid-way in St. Louis. After an unscheduled overnight at an airport hotel, we were rescheduled for another two-stop jaunt to Portland. In short, it took four flights, another couple of hundred dollars, and 48 hours to get to Portland.

A direct flight to Portland usually takes less than five hours. For sake of argument, let's call our carrier Slow Air or SW for short.

Captive at the first gate for four hours, we were repeatedly assured that the delay was momentary, “push back” was imminent, and we heard enough insincere “apologies” about auxiliary power units for a lifetime. At one point, the second



banana in the cockpit allowed malcontents to deplane and seek alternate means. Subsequently, the gate goffer couldn't reconcile the head count and he attempted, as God is my judge, to take attendance with a show of hands and aisle-by-

aisle ID check.

After an hour and a half of that nonsense, he finally reconciled his manifest by exception, calling names he thought might have deplaned. Subsequent events confirmed that those passengers who jumped ship at National Airport were the smart ones.

Upon arrival in St Louis we discovered there we no meal chits, hotel vouchers, transportation, room reservations, or alternate carrier assistance to be had from the SW apparatchiks tasked to “assist.” The only help proffered was a long wait for another booking *with SW* for a future flight. In short, the big reveal was that SW takes no responsibility for missed connections, associated expenses, or booking a flight with another carrier.

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Metaphysical Vacuum Cleaner
Baby Steps Toward the Abyss
Available Illusions

Indeed, SW is a closed loop; they have no reciprocal booking agreements with any other airlines. Miss a connection with SW and you are on your own. Indeed, cabin crews will joke about your plight as gullible hostages.

On the Denver leg the next day, a cabin smart ass actually announced that “if you have connections in Denver with another airline, we don’t care” – long pause for effect – “really, we don’t care!” This is the same crew where another joker began the flight by asking for a show of hands of passengers who liked “dark chocolate.” After some nitwits took the bait, she announced that they were in luck because she was “their dark chocolate” for the morning.

After four consecutive flights with SW, it wasn’t hard to believe that flight crews really didn’t care. Skin color jokes over a public address system just reinforced the message. Another crew clown opened another conversation with “any one travelling with children”–long pause–“or behaving like one should etc.”

Discount carriers are the Homer Simpsons of the hospitality industry; unfunny, unkempt, indifferent, rude, and proud of it. Why have standards for the cheap seats?

Apart from delays, shabby service, bad jokes and the like, the worst part of the discount experience is visual. Age, weight,

dress, hygiene, and grooming for crews on American carriers are all afterthoughts. The only “uniform” apparel at SW is flag ties and scarves, as if faux patriotism compensates for the low rent look.



The slob ethic is now the look for too many domestic cabin crews.

Two coifs are favored at SW, the unmade bed head for women and the Rastafarian cascade for men. One dude serving between Denver and Portland, had a free swinging “do” down to his buns. If your hair is long enough to tuck into your pants, it’s also long enough to swizzle a customer’s coffee. Airborne Rastas would have trouble getting jobs at Wendy’s. Yet, there they are in the unfriendly skies.

In short, the adjective “discount’ is often a euphemism for cheap or defective, in every sense of those words.

If you become a hostage, endure amateur theatrics, incur unforeseen expenses, and squander part of your life in the company of clueless nitwits, how is such an experience a “bargain?”

What is your time worth? Time well spent is not just wealth; it's the only commodity you can't buy more of. The cost of false economies should be measured in terms of what you could be doing instead of wasting time, and treasure; on an automobile fantasy, on a cheap roof, or flying with an airline staffed by clowns.

The author drives a 1987 Toyota Land Cruiser, lives under a slate roof, and vows to forego the indignities of slumming on any future vacation that requires air travel.

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