He Carries On, She Likes to Check

By Scott McCartney

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On airplanes, women like to shrink and curl up in their seats to avoid contact with strangers, while men spread, hogging the armrests. Men carry on less, women are calmer when flight plans go awry. Scott McCartney on Lunch Break looks at gender differences on the plane.

She likes the window seat; he likes the aisle. She wants the shade pulled down; he likes the shade up. She checks a bag; he only carries on. She curls up in a ball to avoid contact; he sits with his elbows and legs splayed out.

The sexes can fly in different directions when it comes to airplane and hotel habits and preferences, adding stress to an already taxing experience for couples and families.

Men still outnumber women among frequent fliers. Several airlines, [US Airways](http://online.wsj.com/public/quotes/main.html?type=djn&symbol=LCC) and [Delta Air Lines](http://quotes.wsj.com/DAL) [DAL +1.03%](http://quotes.wsj.com/DAL) [**DAL**](http://quotes.wsj.com/DAL) **in** Your Value Your Change Short position among them, say their customer base runs about 54% to 56% male. But the difference is leveling off. Virgin America says its passenger surveys over the past year average 52% men and 48% women. [British Airways](http://quotes.wsj.com/ES/IAG) [IAG.MC +1.15%](http://quotes.wsj.com/ES/IAG) [**IAG.MC**](http://quotes.wsj.com/ES/IAG) **in** Your Value Your Change Short position actually carries more women than men, a spokeswoman said.

Membership in Alaska Airlines' frequent-flier program is evenly split between men and women, at least among members for whom gender is known, according to a spokeswoman for the Seattle-based airline. And at American Airlines, men make up 55% of the frequent-flier-program membership, but women under 30 years old now outnumber men in that age group.

As more women join the ranks of road warriors, gender differences are becoming more noticeable, according to airline data, interviews with airlines crews, frequent travelers—and years of fielding traveler questions and complaints. And those differences are increasingly gaining attention of airlines and hotels.

Airlines with entertainment systems, such as Virgin America, say women prefer movies and men are more likely to tune into live news and sports. Blankets get used more by women than men, airlines say.

In a study Delta Air Lines commissioned on fliers' food preferences, the airline found women are more likely than men to favor a chef salad and a tapas menu. The airline is considering menu changes now. With more women visiting airport clubs, Delta, which says 54% of its frequent-flier membership is male, added Better Homes and Gardens to the magazine selection in the clubs.

Hyatt Hotels set up hotel room "labs" to study behavior and found interesting differences between men and women. One example: Women like to read in bed while men like to read in chairs. So Hyatt stepped up installation of more power plugs bedside for e-readers and tablets.

On Saturday, the company will change to new brands of bathroom products tested on women for its properties world-wide. Hyatt Regency Hotels in North America, for instance, will carry KenetMD Skin Care products instead of the Portico products they use now. "If I don't have to bring all of my bath products, I can turn a checked bag into a carry-on bag,'' said Sara Kearney, Hyatt's senior vice president of brands.

In general, airlines say, women prefer window seats and men prefer aisle seats. Of US Airways frequent fliers who have stated a preference on seating, males much prefer aisles over windows, almost 2-to-1, according to the airline's passenger data.

That worked well in past years when planes typically weren't as full and middle seats flew empty. Now full planes likely means these gender differences often will collide.

Suzanne Stork from Seattle says her husband Carl takes the middle seat when they travel together even though he loves to look out the window. That's because she likes to shut the shade to cut down on glare when reading or watching shows. "He's like a little boy with trains. He says, 'Look honey, there's a Singapore 747,''' Ms. Stork said. "I couldn't care less."

Curt Borchardt and Jenny Church, retirees from San Luis Obispo, Calif., both prefer window seats, but she ends up in the middle because he's tall and too cramped in middle seats. He even puts his feet under the middle seat in front of her. So she's started booking a window seat one row behind him. "I like not being in the middle seat,'' Ms. Church said.

Men often complain women pack too much and often have to check bags—risking loss and slowing up the trip. Many women complain Transportation Security Administration rules on liquids put them at a disadvantage. They say they often have to check baggage because cosmetics, toiletries and other supplies don't all fit in a quart-sized baggie.

Women who travel a lot say one of the biggest frustrations is that men often assume women don't have the top-tier elite status or first-class seat for early boarding. Several women interviewed, who were part of a recent super-frequent-flier road trip organized by MilePoint.com, said men would cut in front of them or even shove them in the stampede of boarding, as a result.

"I get pushed out of the way. People just don't believe I belong there,'' said Christy Lipschultz, a Chicago project manager for a financial-services company. Ms. Lipschultz has tallied about 200,000 miles this year on United Airlines and American Airlines.

And once on the plane, the differences become more strained. Who gets the armrest? In airport interviews, women say men often insist on taking it, even when the woman is in the middle seat. Women also complain men hog all the legroom they can claim. One strategy: Dropping something so the male passenger has to retreat when the woman bends down to pick it up.

"I think men just feel entitled and don't notice. They are oblivious,'' said Asya Kamsky, a San Francisco software executive who flies about 200,000 miles a year. Ms. Kamsky said she defends her space against encroaching elbows and legs. "I don't have a problem kicking if I need to,'' she said.

Anne-Marie Maguire, a Cambridge, Mass., consultant, books two aisle seats side-by-side when she travels with her long-legged husband. "Let him take someone else's leg space,'' she said.

When it comes to airline crews, women get better treatment—at least in the opinion of some men. Egbert Simons, who travels frequently as a wine consultant, says his girlfriend, dressed in Diane von Furstenberg or other designers, can go from coach to first class to use the bathroom all the time.

"I try that and they take me away in handcuffs,'' Mr. Simons joked.

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