

Intro: Frequent flyers often get into ruts and routines. When the author was travelling to Japan every six weeks he managed to develop a few routines of my own. His routine consisted of the same drive to the airport, the same parking spot, the same interactions with the club room staff, the same seat on their airplane, the same food and beverages, and the same sleep pattern, which consisted of being awake for the entire 10-hour flight and, in turn, saw the author suffer from jetlag for days. The solution, he thought, was a prescription of Ambien, a very popular sleep aid. In this 'passenger' article, the author will talk about how idle time, Ambien, and access to free, virtually unlimited alcohol can lead to a pretty interesting flight that wasn't part of the same old routine.

By Brian T. Coleman

As a frequent traveler, many of us get in ruts filled with the same old routines.

Traveling from Los Angeles to Japan every 6 weeks I managed to develop a few ruts and routines. These consisted of the same travel clothes, drive to the airport, parking spot, interactions with the club room staff, seat on the airplane, food and beverage selections, and the same sleep pattern. All very boring and all very routine when you do them month after month.

Part of my particular routine that needed to change was the sleep pattern. Being awake for the entire 10 hour flight to Japan I would suffer from jetlag for days. I cleverly thought the solution was a prescription of Ambien, a very popular sleep aid. I learned however that idle time, Ambien, and access to free, unattended, and virtually unlimited alcohol can lead to a pretty interesting flight experience. Yes, this flight was not going to be the same old routine.

Before I begin, please understand, I don't condone this combination of drugs or my behavior on this flight. I am not a medical doctor and yet I still don't recommend any combination of alcohol and sleeping pills. The Ambien warning label actually strongly suggests not mixing the two!

With that note of warning, what follows is simply my recollection of what happened.

The same routine had been followed this day getting to the jet way door except I had my prescription of Ambien in my carryon. I boarded the plane, walked up the stairs, stowed my luggage in the closet, took my seat in 15F and waited for the pre-board glass of sparkling wine... and the arrival of my fellow seatmate.

Within moments of my arrival at 15F, a smiling flight attendant offered me a glass of sparkling wine. Another flight attendant, right on cue, offered to hang my jacket.

About 10 minutes passed and still no passenger had come to claim the seat next to me. I look around and notice about 5 empty seats. I'm thinking this is my lucky day. There are only about 3 minutes to departure when the chief purser makes the announcement to turn off all electronic devices. They are going to close the door any moment.

Three more minutes passed and everyone was in their seats. Empty glasses were collected and not

another soul walked up the stairs to claim the seat next to me. Yes indeed, this was going to be a special day!

We pushed back, listen to the safety briefing, take off, get to cruising altitude, and then the announcement I was waiting for... pre-dinner beverages. I order my normal Scotch and Ginger, sit back, relax and enjoy the ride.

Soon menus are handed out, orders taken; refills poured, and then linens are set on our tray tables indicating dinner will soon be served. This is also my signal for the consumption of a single 10mg tablet of Ambien. Having done my homework, knowing how long it takes the flight attendants to serve dinner, I know if I take the tablet now, I'll have time to eat, finish dessert and be well on my way to slumberland without wasting a second of sleep time.

Dinner is served, a nice glass of Merlot is consumed with dinner and shortly thereafter dishes are cleared away. The desert cart makes its way through the isle. The only thing out of the ordinary at this time is that I'm not feeling the least bit sleepy. Not one sheep has entered my head to be counted.

I order my normal vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce and because I'm not feeling sleepy at all, I order a Baileys to go along with it. A nice combination I'm thinking.

Dessert is finished, linens picked up and because I'm nowhere to being asleep, I break out my laptop, kick my shoes off, put my feet up, cover myself in the blanket and start working on some emails.

Several minutes pass and the flight attendant comes by and offers me another drink. Another Scotch and Ginger was ordered. And because I'm not feeling a bit sleepy, I make the brilliant decision to take yet another Ambien. I was thinking (actually, I wasn't thinking at all) that if the first one didn't work, 2 should do the trick and put in into the allusive sleep I've been working towards.

If you are keeping score, I've now consumed a sparkling wine, 2 Scotch and Gingers, a glass of wine, and a Baileys. Not bad for a few hours into flight. Oh, and not 1 but 2 10mg Ambien!

Why I'm awake, or alive, is still a mystery to me?

I get up to talk with the flight attendants in the galley for about 20 minutes and then return to my seat.

So there I am, totally comfy in my chair, feet up, shoes off, blanket over my lap and computer on the tray with emails being answered. Life is good.

The next thing I remember is the plane touching down at Narita. My shoes are on my feet, my

seatback is in the full upright position, my tray table has been stowed and my computer is ... somewhere. I have no idea.

I fall back asleep as we taxi down the runway and taxiways to our gate.

I'm awoken by the PA announcement of the gate agent welcoming us to Narita and telling us the bag carousel where we can claim our bags. I confidently look in the overhead for my computer bag and nothing. I then look in the window storage compartment and much to my surprise, I find the computer bag. Too embarrassed to check to see if it's inside but assume it is based on the weight, I walk over to the closet and retrieve my carryon.

At the luggage closet I am greeted by one of the flight attendants with whom I had great conversation with just 7 hours prior. She doesn't say a word to me but has an unusually large smile on her face. I don't make much of it and proceed down the stairs wishing her a good stay in Japan. At the bottom of the stairs I'm greeted by the Japanese language flight attendant who winks at me. I thought this was strange as I didn't remember seeing her during the flight nor did I need any language assistance.

Making my way through the airport towards customs and immigration, I notice a completed customs declaration form in my pocket. I don't remember filling one out during the flight, but there it is, in my pocket and in my handwriting. Strange...

As I'm walking through the airport, I notice a clinging in my pocket. I check one pocket and find two mini bottles of Scotch. In the other I find a bottle of Vodka and Gin. Now I'm starting to get confused.

I clear immigration and head over to the Narita Express to take the train into Tokyo, Shinjuku Station.

After my ticket is purchased I luck out by getting on the next train, which was about 5 minutes from departing. I board the train, take my seat and immediately fall asleep again.

The next thing I remember is being woken by the train stopping at Tokyo station. I immediately fall asleep. Again I am woken by the train stopping at Shinjuku Station just minutes later.

My possessions are gathered and I make the sort walk to my hotel. I check in and make it to my room.

All seems normal until I open my suitcase. Inside I find additional bottles of booze and one large bottle of Sake. How they got there I haven't a clue!

Did the flight attendants put them there? I look for a note or any other clue. Nothing is found.

Did I steal them? That's not like me so I don't think so.

Did fellow passengers see what was happening and put them there?

Was the plane abducted by aliens?

Thinking back to the events on the flight, I have no clue as to who dressed me, who put my computer away, who put the bottles of booze in my pants pocket and suitcase. I don't remember any of it.

That night I went to bed and didn't wake up until 7:00 AM the next day. I missed out on dinner and my free night in Tokyo.

It wasn't until I returned home and talked with a Nurse friend of mine that I learned the common effects of Ambien and alcohol. It seems as though sleep walking is one of them.

I'm not sure if sleep walking is what happened to me but in hind sight, it seems likely.

Although I still don't know how the bottles of booze got in my suitcase that was buried in the back of the 747 closet. That must have been the aliens.