

"Sure, we have mats you can borrow—how about a case of athlete's foot, too?"
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"You might not want to eat here on a Monday."
page 281

"Your last-minute changes are my retirement fund."
page 145

"We offer tons of investment options. Too many, in fact..."
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"I trained a whole weekend to learn this procedure."
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1,001 THINGS THEY WON'T TELL YOU

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**BY JONATHAN DAHL
AND THE EDITORS OF**

SmartMoney
*The Wall Street
Journal Magazine*

10 Things Your Airline Won't Tell You

1 *"WELCOME TO THE CROWDED SKIES."*

If you've flown much lately, you've probably noticed that air travel feels like rush hour on the subway. Indeed, as airlines get more efficient, they're squeezing more people onto fewer planes. But that's had an unintended consequence: More fliers get left behind. Airlines have always overbooked flights to compensate for last-minute cancellations. But they don't always get the numbers right. And with so few seats open on later flights, fewer folks are volunteering to get bumped. As a result, the number of involuntarily bumped passengers is up, having grown 44 percent between the first nine months of 2005 and the same period in 2007, according to the Department of Transportation.

The silver lining for travelers is that airlines must get involuntarily bumped fliers to their destination within four hours of the expected arrival time or refund them up to \$400. The bad news is that the problem isn't going away—airlines are busy developing computer systems to help them rebook bumped passengers. "Instead of fixing the problem," says Tony Polito, an associate professor at East Carolina University who has published several

studies on the airline industry, "they are institutionalizing it."

2 *"YOUR HARD-WON AIR MILES ARE WORTH LESS ALL THE TIME."*

Air miles are easy to accrue. You can earn them using your credit card, getting a mortgage, "for anything short of breathing," says Tim Winship, editor at large of SmarterTravel.com. American Airlines, for example, has thousands of "mileage partners" to whom it sells air miles, making its frequent-flier program an important revenue center. And United Airlines' Mileage Plus plan brought in \$600 million for the company in 2006.

But as miles flood the market, they're getting harder to use. Joe Lopez, a publications manager in Phoenix, wanted to redeem the 70,000 miles he earned on Northwest—but couldn't find a flight he liked. "It was ridiculous," he says. (A Northwest spokesperson says 50,000 miles will get you a seat on almost any domestic flight the airline offers.) What's worse, some airlines have reduced the shelf life of air miles, while others have increased the amount required for an upgrade. Winship says customers can keep their account current by using a credit card