

Letters to the Editor

Seats v safety

Sir,
The biggest single general interest after the sheer joy of being involved in flight must surely be safety in flight, and safety has applications across the board. A Cessna Caravan crashed on take-off in Botswana with but four of the twelve aboard having the time and wherewithal to escape, and those who did benefited from one passenger's expert knowledge and reactions. The Hudson River ditching a year and more ago gave hope to many that flying disasters, if not every accident, could be avoided by standard safety preparations, competent crew and adequate exit and flotation equipment.

On Monday 7th November 2011 there were a series of flights from Tromsø to Oslo to Copenhagen to Geneva by SAS, the first leg being on a Boeing, and the other two on Airbus. On both aircraft row 10 was adjacent to the over-wing emergency exit. On the Boeing one seat had been omitted adjacent to the exit, theoretically allowing the person in seats 10A or 9B to open the exit door in case of absolute need. On the Airbus there was no such compromise and a

full 3+3 seating capacity was maintained.

Taking into account that, should an emergency arise, the person delegated by 'accident' to follow the 'instructions' to open the escape route would be doing so for the first and probably only time, it would seem prudent to maintain some sort of access for a cabin crew member to help as and when the need arises. There being no clear way to get to the exit without scrambling through an economy-sized seat-space, one has to wonder what would be the case if one of the seat occupants were of a nervous disposition or of an above-average size or shape.

Add to this potential bottle-neck the fact that half the passengers in front of the wing exits should go by preference to the cockpit end exits (with clear access for boarding-debarking), that half the passengers behind the wing exits should go similarly to the rear exits (with similarly clear access/egress), half of the total passengers will have their nearest exits blocked by seats with no clear exit routes, and those controlled by rank novices.

It seems that the lessons of the Hudson ditching have not been learnt, and that common sense has not prevailed on these SAS flights. It seems unlikely that SAS are flaunting the rules and so the rules must be wrong. In most GA aircraft the pilot(s) have few passengers on a flight for whom they find themselves responsible and are usually well aware of the need for efficient evacuation in case of emergency, and have a very direct command of each passenger. In

commercial situations such as the one described above, training, rules and regulations take the strain between pilot(s) and those for whom they are responsible.

GA has something to teach the commercial side here. Happily, on this day each flight passed safely, albeit uncomfortably. If an emergency had occurred, we were among the fifty percent who would not have escaped through the over-wing exits. We were lucky. SAS should have been prepared, not lucky - four seats too many on a Boeing, six seats too many on an Airbus. Is it worth the risk?

Christopher Watts

GAR checking

Sir,
On arrival after a routine flight to Lee on Solent, I was met by the police. The GAR that I had filed by fax was checked against the passports of the occupants of the aeroplane. The officer explained that security checks were likely to be more frequent in the run-up to the Olympics; he also mentioned Farnborough Airshow.

He asked me to disseminate this information. He also said that there would be little tolerance for errors. Seemingly the GAR system could be removed from pilots who don't declare properly, forcing them to use Customs airports.

Please pass it on!

Paul Rennie

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