

TAKEOFFS AND LANDINGS

Airplane Water Woes

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Thirsty? The jury's still out over the safety of airline drinking water.

Despite recent tests by the Environmental Protection Agency that found traces of coliform bacteria in tap-water samples from 20 out of 158 aircraft -- including two positive tests for E. coli -- airlines still may be serving water from airplane water tanks.

While most U.S. carriers say they only serve tank water in coffee and tea, policies differ. United Airlines usually serves bottled water, but may pour the plane's potable water in coach, "depending on the length of service," a spokesman says. Alaska Airlines serves bottled water, but attendants may serve from the tap when necessary.

On a recent American Airlines flight, attendants were seen pouring tap water from mineral-water bottles with the labels removed. The airline says flight attendants will serve tap water when they run out of bottled water on a flight, but use metal pitchers. "This would only have happened if the pitchers were dirty or damaged," says a spokesman.

Neither the EPA nor the Food and Drug Administration, which also regulates drinking water aboard planes, prohibits serving water from the airline tank. "If an airline has been in compliance," said Thomas Skinner, head of the EPA's enforcement division, "that shouldn't be an issue."

The Air Transport Association, the organization that represents most U.S. airlines, believes the EPA's study was flawed and is calling for a retest. The sample group, it says, involved 100 fewer aircraft than the EPA recommends testing. ATA spokesman Doug Wills says some airline employees observed EPA workers taking samples without wearing rubber gloves, a violation of EPA testing protocol. In addition, the ATA says that more than one-third of the planes tested were operated by foreign carriers, over which the EPA has no jurisdiction.

The EPA stands by its agents. Mr. Skinner says the sample represented a cross-section of planes -- from commuter jets to 747s. He denies that agents collected samples without using rubber gloves. "We got a 12% hit rate [for total coliform]," Mr. Skinner said. "I'd be concerned, too, if I was the ATA."

The government released its report last month. In November 2002, Weekend Journal conducted its own tests of airline water purity and found a range of bacteria in some samples.

Despite differences about the initial testing, the EPA says no one has ever reported an illness from airline water. A new round of testing likely will happen sooner than previously scheduled, and both organizations say that passengers with compromised immune systems, or those who simply are worried, should choose bottled water over tap.

Screeners Get Friendly

With more mandatory security pat-downs going into effect at airports, some TSA officials are trying to placate harried travelers.

At the Fort Lauderdale, Fla., airport, screeners give stickers to children who need to be coaxed through the metal detector, while TSA employees in Orlando, Fla., place hand puppets on the

security wands. In Tucson, Ariz., screeners give candy to adults who remove jackets and shoes without complaining. Looking to Thanksgiving, Tucson TSA manager Mollie Crawford says she's considering having someone dress up like a giant turkey to ease the tension of long lines.

The TSA says that with funding tight, token incentives aren't part of standard operating procedure, and the candy in Tucson is paid for out-of-pocket by local TSA employees and managers. "We appreciate anytime screeners go above and beyond," says TSA spokesperson Darrin Kayser.

Odds & Ends

CRABBY TRIPS: Dungeness crab season begins Nov. 6 on most of the California coast, and boats on San Francisco Bay are already selling tickets for their all-crab feasts. The Angel Island ferry leaves Tiburon for five monthly Saturday crab feasts (\$45 per person) starting Nov. 20(www.angelislandferry.com). That day, the Red and White Fleet also starts crab-feed cruises -- including a sail beneath the Golden Gate Bridge -- from Pier 43 at Fisherman's Wharf (www.redandwhite.com).