

I Was a Flight Attendant During the Golden Age of Travel

”It was like going to graduate school for the world.”

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The so-called Golden Age of air travel seems just about as mythical as Westeros in 2019, but there was a time when flying was considered glamorous, exclusive, and much more expensive than it is today. Before airline deregulation came along in the late 1970s, carriers like Pan Am, Eastern, and Trans World Airlines (TWA) jetted high-flyers around the world in sleek, comfortable planes, their every need serviced by runway-ready flight attendants (martinis included). But is such misty-eyed nostalgia misplaced? We asked former flight attendants to share their memories of what it was really like to work on an airplane during that halcyon era—from tinfoil uniforms to 10 day layovers on an isolated tropical island.

Left: Barbara Shale at her Eastern Airlines training school graduation on August 2, 1967; Carol Ann Grecco with her American Airlines graduating class in 1969.

Courtesy Barbara Shale; Carol Ann Grecco

Barbara Shale, 73, lives in Miami but grew up in Ohio. She worked for Eastern Airlines from 1967 until 1991, when the airline folded.

In May 1967, a month before graduating from college, I still didn't know what I wanted to do. The airlines were just starting to fly jets and needed to expand their stewardess base, and a boyfriend from New York suggested I consider it—that way, I could get out of the Midwest mindset. He was right. We had it all. We saw the world. We went from being small-town girls to knowing how to get along with everyone; to learning that other cultures had so much to offer. I still miss meeting people from other countries. It was a much better education than college.

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By the '70s I had enough seniority to [choose to] fly to the West Coast. We called ourselves the bi-coastal flight attendants: we had parties with celebrities, and bought back cases of wine from wineries. (Flight crews single-handedly made Coors Beer famous by transporting it to the East Coast—where it was unheard of at the time.) Every celebrity flew commercial back then. One of my most memorable [passengers] was Michael Jackson. His people wouldn't let him eat or drink anything, but we brought him to the galley and fed him. Once one of my acrylic fingernails flew off into Martin Sheen's drink. He thought it was funny and told me to just take it out and not make a new drink for him. After his term in office, Jimmy Carter was often on flights to Haiti to build houses. He once sat across from the galley drinking a Coke and talking to me while I served the meals, just like an ordinary person.

One time, though, a little girl who was about eight years old told me she wanted to grow up to be a stewardess. I said: “No, honey, you want to grow up to be a pilot. They make more money.”

Left: Hale Rowland with her fellow Hawaiian Airlines flight attendants; Willow Carter (middle) on the ground in Vietnam in 1969.

Courtesy Hale Rowland, Willow Carter

Willow Carter, 74, lives in San Francisco. She worked for charter specialist World Airways between 1968 and 1973, and then for United Air Carrier based in Saudi Arabia from 1979 to 1981.

I was hired as a stewardess with World Airways, the world’s largest charter airline. We circled the globe flying military and commercial charters. Not having a schedule meant my suitcase was always packed for anything from a three-day to a three-week trip. One time, I flew around the world in eight days: Toronto, Manchester, London, Shannon, Athens, Mumbai, Cam Ranh Bay, Japan, and Oakland.

On the military charters, practically all the men were on their way to Vietnam. For a while, I had terrible anxiety, thinking that I was taking these young men to die. Then I realized: if it wasn’t me, it would be someone else, so I was determined to make their trip as comfortable as possible. In 1972, I spent nearly a month on a temporary duty assignment in Vietnam, during the war; Air Vietnam had leased two of our aircraft to fly in-country. On my days off, I’d be on the hotel’s rooftop terrace, sunbathing, while listening to gunfire in the air.

My most unique layover was for 10 days on Ilha do Sal, in the Cape Verde islands. I stayed in a rickety, wooden hotel where stray cats lived beneath the floorboards. It was so isolated—there was one palm tree—so we pleaded with a driver each morning to take us round to the other side of the island. That’s where the South African Airways crews were staying; because of apartheid, they couldn’t layover in Africa on their flights to Europe. We assigned each of our crew members a job [to stop us getting bored]: the first officer was in charge of entertainment, the captain was our spiritual adviser.

The work itself was exhausting. We worked long hours, and were only guaranteed four consecutive days off each month. We carried these huge fiberglass suitcases—and they didn’t have wheels back then. But you’d be amazed at what your body can endure and the reserve stamina you can find when you’re on duty for 24 hours at a time. We promoted our worldwide charter service as “all first class” and were never allowed to sleep while on duty, despite the long international flights—no wonder the average length of time a charter stewardess worked was a year and a half. I managed five years and loved it.

"Once one of my acrylic fingernails flew off into Martin Sheen's drink."

Cathy Martinez, 74, lives in Key Biscayne, Florida, but is originally from Ireland. She was a stewardess with TWA from 1968 to 1973.

During my interview I was asked about my habits: if I drank alcohol and how many cups of coffee I drank every day. Then, during training we had daily classes on how to strip our faces clean [of makeup] and start from scratch. My appearance had to conform to a certain code, like weight according to height. There was a "three strikes and you're out" rule for people who put on weight. Our uniforms were designed by Valentino, and there was one piece that was a soft, foil mini dress in gold, silver, and bronze. They were a little inconvenient: you had to change into them on the plane before the passengers boarded, because you couldn't exactly go on the subway or bus wearing it.

Hijacked planes were becoming a major concern then, as well as bomb threats. The latter happened with three of my flights, and one of the threats appeared to be real so we landed and the plane was searched. We were given the all clear but many passengers didn't re-board.

Without restrictions and security checks [at airports], however, passengers could still make a run for it to get on board last-minute. In one case, a gentleman did just that and when I went to take his order, he tilted forward and took his last breath. Apparently the run made him suffer a heart attack.

Victoria Clark, 78, lives in Eugene, Oregon. She was a flight attendant for Continental Airlines between 1960 and 1963, and was based in Albuquerque, Los Angeles, and Seattle.

When I started there were usually around 600 applications for 20 positions, so it was quite competitive. There was a written, verbal, and physical exam—including a full pelvic exam, to make sure you hadn't had children or were pregnant. We knew our wings would be clipped when we turned 33.

Oleg Cassini designed our uniforms, and there were two versions: the winter uniform was navy with red slips and the summer dresses were light beige. We had to wear pastel slips underneath those, so that when you reached up in the cabin, the slip would show. (At that time, women's underwear only came in white or black, so they would use Rit-Dye to create the pastel colors.)

Most of the pilots were World War II vets. One pilot in particular stood out: Mira Slovak. He was a famous pilot who escaped from Czechoslovakia. When he made it to the U.S., he worked as a stunt pilot, racing pilot, and as a personal pilot for Bill Boeing. I flew with him about six times; he was always kind, but I knew he was a big deal. When he was the pilot, after the usual safety part of the on-board announcement, we'd say "Tighten your lap straps good and secure, Big Daddy's taking off!" He would take a pretty steep lift and sharp turns on take-off.

Left: Sonia Bodner while working as a flight attendant in Europe; Rebecca Sprecher during her time with Pan Am in the 1970s.

Courtesy Sonia Bodner; Rebecca Sprecher

Sonia Bodner, 71, was born and brought up in London, but now lives in Fort Lauderdale. She began working as a flight attendant in Europe in 1969. Her husband is an airline pilot, as is one of her sons, who works for Hawaiian Airlines.

I saw an ad in the newspaper, looking for young women to come to an open interview for a summer job position as a stewardess for a charter airline. The interview was brief: They asked me a few questions about geography and to name the Prime Minister of Malta. (Luckily, his name had been in the newspaper the day before.) I was hired for the summer, and told that 10 percent of the 400 of us hired might be offered a permanent position after the summer.

Most of my flights at the beginning were to Spain and its islands: Mallorca, Ibiza, and Tenerife. We were a charter airline, so we didn't have a first class cabin. My airline was called Dan-Air, but its nickname was Dan Dare. They would buy old, used aircraft for the fleet, many of them from Pan Am; there was one fatal accident, when a plane crashed into a mountain in Spain and everyone on board was lost. Fortunately, most of the pilots were professional retirees from the RAF.

You know the cliché: "Coffee, tea, or me?" On one flight, I walked into the cockpit to ask the pilots what they would like for dinner. The captain looked at me, from head to toe, and he said "I would like your leg." I told him "I am not on the menu!" [If that was now], it would be called sexual harassment.

Carol Brown and other former flight attendants in their PAA uniforms at the Savannah World Wings Convention in 2017.

Courtesy Carol Brown

Carol Brown, 72, lives in Savannah. She worked for Pan Am from 1969 to 1975.

There was a pride in being part of Pan Am in the Golden Age. We were not just employees, but part of a team at the world's most experienced airline. The whole world knew Pan Am and the "blue ball." We'd walk down the street or through the terminal and heads would turn.

I used to have Maureen O'Hara on my flight from JFK to Rock Sound [in the Bahamas]; she was married to a Pan Am pilot. She'd sit in first class with her big dark glasses on and a scarf around her head. She wouldn't say very much. On one of my flights from New York to London, I had the Australian Davis Cup team; most of them were on their way to play Wimbledon, and they gave me tickets on that layover to see them play.

The first class meal back then was a whole white glove presentation—from caviar to roast beef—and cooked in the tiny ovens on board. We made cherries jubilee [for dessert], and for breakfast, the eggs were made to order; imagine cooking a soft-boiled egg in a hot pot and getting it just right.

Carol Greco, 71, lives in Los Angeles. She was part of the American Airlines graduating class of 1969, stationed in New York City.

A stewardess came to speak at my high school for career day, and the excitement at the thought of travel caught my attention immediately. I lined up TWA, American Airlines, and Pan Am—the big three—but decided to go to American first because of the uniforms. It had just come out with the "Americana" service: plaid, navy blue, and red outfits. I was used to a uniform having been in Catholic private schools my whole life.

Once I was accepted, I left for Texas for American Airlines's six-week training. We had a uniform fitting where they took our measurements, and we were all given "the beauty day" in a salon, including a personal evaluation with a hairdresser. I had long, long hair at that time and I remember he played with my ponytail, but then had to cut it all off at the nape. I was tearing up as I saw him cut it off completely. It was a shock.

All the flight attendants were given a key that opened up the cockpit door of every AA aircraft to make sure we could access and service the cockpit at any time. You'd never find that today. During my first flight to California from New York, I was summoned to meet the captain; they heard I was the new girl and a recent graduate. The captain said "Come sit on my lap, come here sweetheart." He told the co-pilot to

push something to take it off autopilot, and then gave me the steering wheel and told me to fly the airplane. “A little to the left,” he said. I was flabbergasted.

”We knew our wings would be clipped when we turned 33.”

Hale Rowland, 89, lives between Honolulu and San Diego. She was a flight attendant for Hawaiian Airlines between 1952 and 1957.

I was a teacher at Pearl Harbor Elementary School and the principal was friends with the recruiter at Hawaiian Airlines. She stopped me in the hall one day and told me to go see her. I was hired on the spot.

You couldn’t have acne, eyeglasses, jewelry, or long hair—well, unless you were a hula dancer. They’d make an exception then, but you had to wear it back. In fact, we would [hula] dance for passengers anytime someone brought a ukulele on board.

The most memorable route was Maui. It was always very rough landing there, and we’d have to hang onto straps because the plane would go up and down; sometimes it was so rough you would smash into the bulkhead. We had a baby born onboard one flight. The passenger said she was going to have her baby, and another flight attendant called the captain. The other passengers moved to the front of the cabin, and he went back, they put a blanket down, and the baby just popped out. She’s named Halani, after Hawaiian Airlines [and the Hawaiian word for sky or heaven, *lani*].

Left: Ro Logrippo Spinelli with her World Airways graduating class in Northern California in 1968; Logrippo Spinelli sat in the engine of a plane in Vietnam.

Courtesy Ro LoGrippo

Ro Logrippo Spinelli, 73, lives in suburban Phoenix, Arizona. She worked for charter specialist World Airways between 1968 and 1970.

My Chicago apartment was across the hall from two Delta flight attendants who I constantly heard talk about work flights that took them here and there. It sounded so exciting and I wanted that in my life. So, I called every single airline in the phone book on my lunch break. When I called the last one listed, World Airways, I discovered they were interviewing for stewardesses the very next day in the Wrigley Building—only a block from my current work location on Michigan Avenue.

My interview was with the Chief Stewardess at the time. She asked what I would do if I didn’t get the job. I told her: “Keep interviewing with other airlines because I really want to travel and I love meeting new people.” What I didn’t tell her was that

on almost every flight I took, I would get air sick. I was sure I'd figure a way around that if it happened.

We'd often be so excited after landing in a new place, that we'd all share a ride after we got cleaned up and head straight off to see the sights. If we couldn't afford to do that—as a newbie, for instance, our pay was \$65 a week gross—we would often play bridge at a hotel card table. I became very good at that game during my flying days. In Japan, we'd always go to a place called Kay's Bath House, where you could soak in a hot tub and get a massage, all in an hour. The “special airline rate” was just \$2.82 for that.

”We had gorgeous caviar, and used to wait in the galley with teaspoons poised to scoop up the leftovers.”

Rebecca Snider Sprecher now lives in Beaufort, South Carolina. For much of her adult life, she was based in Honolulu, where she lived while working for Pan Am in the 1970s.

She co-wrote *Flying*, a novel about her experience, with colleague Paula Helfrich.

Being a flight attendant was like going to graduate school for the world. The year I started at Pan Am, 1972, was an inflection point. It was just before women started expanding their horizons in terms of their careers. Back then, most either got married, or became teachers, nurses, secretaries, or stewardesses. Only a very few were going into law or medicine, and I don't think I knew anybody who was getting an MBA or going into business.

My first uniform was the one that looked like an English riding habit: a blouse with a stock tie, gored skirt, jacket with princess seams, bowler hat with the Pan Am logo pinned right on the front, and gloves. We loved that uniform.

I loved [flying to] Delhi. We would sleep for a few hours and then go on mad shopping extravaganzas or meet for a late curry lunch at the Mughal Room at The Oberoi hotel. Occasionally, we would stop by the American Embassy to swim in their pool and eat a steak—we had an open invitation.

My favorite spot on the plane to work was the upstairs dining room on the 747. When passengers hadn't reserved it in advance, we would go around the cabin downstairs and invite them to dine up there, matching couples we thought would enjoy each other's company. They stayed up there for four or five hours: business deals were struck; lifelong friendships formed; romances ignited. On the French dinner service, our dishes were catered by Maxim's of Paris. We had gorgeous caviar, and used to wait in

the galley with teaspoons poised to scoop up the leftovers when the cart was returned from the cabin. We learned about French cheeses and wines, and became Champagne snobs early on.

I think what gave Pan Am its cachet was the fact that over a third of its flight attendants were foreign nationals. We all flew together, and shared hotel rooms on lengthy trips, some as long as 10 or 12 days. You never knew whether your roommate was going to be from Singapore or France, Alabama or Kuala Lumpur. We had a unique global culture before anyone had ever heard of it. We embraced and celebrated our differences rather than fearing them.

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