

## AIR TRAVEL IN CHINA?

I was reading a travel magazine the other day and the author mentioned that you could fly between destinations in China quite easily. This brought to mind the following excerpt from Paul Theroux's book, "Riding the Iron Rooster."

*"Whatever objections I could devise against the trains, they were nothing compared to the horrors of air travel in China. I had a small dose of it when I left Urumchi for Lanzhou - there was no point in retracing my steps on the Iron Rooster, I was told to be at the airport three hours early - i.e. 7.00 a.m. The plane left five hours late, at 3.00 p.m. in the afternoon.*

*It was an old Russian jet, and its metal covering was wrinkled and cracked like the tinfoil in a used cigarette pack. The seats were jammed so closely together that my knees hurt and the circulation to my feet was cut off. Every seat was taken, and every person was heavily laden with carry-on baggage - big skull cracking bundles that fell out of the overhead rack. Even before the plane took off, people were softly and soupily vomiting, with their heads down and their hands folded, in the solemn and prayerful way that the Chinese habitually puke.*

*After two hours we were each given an envelope that contained three caramel candies, some gum and three sticky boiled sweets; a piece of cellophane almost concealed a black strand of dried beef that looked like oakum and tasted like decayed rope; and (because Chinese can be optimistic) a toothpick.*

*Two hours later a girl wearing an old postman's uniform went around with a tray. Thinking it might be better food, I snatched one of the little parcels - it was a key ring.*

*The plane was very hot, and then so cold I could see my breath. It creaked like a schooner under sail.*

*Another two hours passed. I said: "I am out of my mind". An announcement was made, saying in a gargling way that we would shortly be landing. At this point everyone except the pukers stood up and began yanking their bundles out of the racks; and they remained standing, pushing, tottering and vaguely complaining - deaf to the demands that they sit down and strap themselves in - as the plane bounced, did wheelies on the runway and limped to Lanzhou terminal. Never again!*

*My guide Mr Fang asked in a rare burst of English: "What you think of Chinese airplane?"*

*"Lamentable" I replied.*

*"Thank you very much!" replied a beaming Mr Fang.*

I'm sure with the olympic games approaching, all aircraft will be updated for those planning on flying internally in China (hopefully).

*L. Haime (WA Buicks)*