GLAMOUR WITH ALTITUDE

The jet age spelled adventure for the elite sisterhood of pretty, single, bright, young women known as stewardesses. But it wasn't all Pucci uniforms and carving Chateaubriand for wealthy potential husbands—there were girdle checks and "Fly me" ads, too. Nonetheless, they were starlets of the skies in a way today's flight attendants can only imagine

BY BRUCE HANDY

You've probably always been told that flight attendants hate being referred to as stewardesses, that to do so is a faux pas on the order of asking for a Turkish coffee in a Greek cafe. But this isn't entirely so. Many flight attendants are proud of having been stewardesses, and well they should be. They were the best-dressed, best-groomed runaways the world has ever seen.

Readers who grew up in the 1970s or later may need to be reminded that stewardesses are what flight attendants were called once upon a time when they were uniformly young, single, slim, attractive, and female. A good smile (all teeth, no gums) and some abil-
ity as a conversationalist were further prerequisites. Sonnie Morrow Sims, for one, fit the bill in all particulars. In the early 1960s she might have been described as a leggy blonde; then, as now, it was a skill set that could open many doors. As a 20-year-old college dropout, she began flying for American Airlines in 1962, a time when air travel in general was a far more rarefied experience than it is today: even on routine flights she would pass out roses to women passengers and serve seven-course meals on fine china and linen tablecloths. She also flew on special charters such as the plane that took the Beatles from city to city in 1966 on their last U.S. tour and the government-contracted flights that ferried soldiers to Vietnam and, if they were fortunate, back home again. Flying with the Beatles was fun: she saved the utensils and everything else they touched in airsickness bags and sent it to her kid sister back home in Minnesota. The Vietnam flights were fun, too, in their way, though when the young soldiers she had just spent hours getting to know deplaned in Saigon or Da Nang, she would lock herself in the bathroom and sob, unable to say good-bye.

Not every stewardess at every airline had the opportunity to knock a bowl of cereal into John Lennon's lap (he refused to laugh it off) or get shot at during takeoff by the Vietcong (they missed), but, for most, flying was an adventure in and of itself at a time when the average woman got married at the age of 20 and when opportunities outside the home were limited to teaching, nursing, and the secretarial pool. "None of that appealed to me," says Sims. "I just really wanted to travel." Well, sure. And for tens of thousands of young women like her, who may have wanted to meet Mr. Right, but not before a bit of larking about ("This morning, sight-seeing in New York—and in about five hours, I'll meet my date for dinner in San Francisco," read a 1961 recruiting ad for American Airlines), the draw was obvious. "Marriage is fine! But shouldn't you see the world first?" asked a 1967 United Airlines ad. Yes, most stewardesses would have answered, endorsing both sides of the equation. "These women almost to a person were kind of the black sheep of their families," says Laurie Power, who flew for TWA for 29 years, beginning in 1963. "They left"—home, college, other jobs—"because they couldn't stand the drudgery of everyday life, which was marriage or teaching, and washing on Monday and ironing on Tuesday. So life as a stewardess took on a more dramatic, more interesting scale." In Power's case, that would translate into invitations to parties thrown by big-shot Hollywood producers, to countless hotel and restaurant openings, and, once, to a cruise on a yacht owned by John Thedoracopulos, one of the richest men in Greece. "A bevy of flight attendants in any gathering was always a good thing," she says. "A bunch of pretty girls sitting around a pool—people were always inviting us here and there and everywhere, because we were sort of like icing, I suppose."

It would be only a slight overstatement to say that stewardesses in the 1960s were to glamour what firefighters and cops have more recently been to heroism. "We were almost on the same level as a movie star," says Sonnie Sims. "People admired us when we walked through the terminal. I remember our uniforms—they were all custom-fitted. They were just sculpted to your body, so everybody looked fabulous. We were all thin and had these great figures and wore white gloves and hats. You walked through the terminals with your head really high and you knew everybody was staring at you." Sex, of course, was part of the equation. The prerequisites were largely the Bre.

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"Coffee, Tea or Me?" Purporting to be the "naughty" and "uninhibited" memoirs of two stewardesses, the book—frank but not particularly salacious—sold more than a million copies and spawned three sequels. Its most commercially significant revelation: that some "stews" on some occasions had sex. No doubt the same could have been said about any group of young unmarried women, but most young unmarried women weren't already pursuing a career in which they were wearing their way to the farthest reaches of the globe—a mobility that was historically unprecedented for anyone, let alone America's unchaperoned daughters. "I thought I'd died and gone to heaven," says a former Pan Am steward recalling how one of her very first flights ended with a layover at a Lisbon beach hotel. The prerequisites were largely the same no matter which airline you hoped to fly for: with rare exceptions, you needed to have two X chromosomes; to be no younger than 20 and no older than 27; to be no shorter than five feet two inches or pec; and the secretarial pool. "None of that appealed to me," says Sims. "I just really wanted to travel." Well, sure. And for tens of thousands of young women like her, who may have wanted to meet Mr. Right, but not before a bit of larking about ("This morning, sight-seeing in New York—and in about five hours, I'll meet my date for dinner in San Francisco," read a 1961 recruiting ad for American Airlines), the draw was obvious. "Marriage is fine! But shouldn't you see the world first?" asked a 1967 United Airlines ad. Yes, most stewardesses would have answered, endorsing both sides of the equation. "These women almost to a person were kind of the black sheep of their families," says Laurie Power, who flew for TWA for 29 years, beginning in 1963. "They left"—home, college, other jobs—"because they couldn't stand the drudgery of everyday life, which was marriage or teaching, and washing on Monday and ironing on Tuesday. So life as a stewardess took on a more dramatic, more interesting scale." In Power's case, that would translate into invitations to parties thrown by big-shot Hollywood producers, to countless hotel and restaurant openings, and,
32; to not currently be married (though it was permissible to be widowed or divorced); to not have children; and to absolutely, positively not be pregnant. In short, you needed to be both desirable and, at least in theory, available.

Like starlets under contract to Louis B. Mayer's MGM, stewardesses were told how to stand, how to walk, how to style their hair, how to make themselves up. Their "look" was as polished as the marble in a corporate lobby, and quality control was no joke: a woman who flew for TWA remembers that, aside from garden-variety infractions such as forgetting one's hat or getting caught smoking in uniform, stewardesses could be suspended if their milky complexions were darkened or freckled by too much time in the sun. A former Eastern Air Lines stewardess recalls being plucked from a flight for having a bruise on her leg, as if she had been a damaged piece of fruit blighting a grocery-store display.

What they really were was bait, corporate geishas trained to please the male passengers who formed the bulk of the airlines' passenger rolls—as much as 80 percent in the late 60s, by one estimate. An ad for United made the pitch with a frankness that would be disarming if it weren't also appalling: "Every [passenger] gets warmth, friendliness and extra care. And someone may get a wife." In fact, this was a two-way selling point: Eastern Air Lines, for one, boasted to potential stewardesses that its Miami-based flight-attendant training center was the "finest school for brides in the country." In case you're keeping score, some graduates did quite well for themselves. Henry Fonda's fifth wife, Shirlee, was an American Airlines stewardess. Susan Gutfreund, the second wife of John Gutfreund, the former CEO of Salomon Brothers, had briefly flown for Pan Am. Yes, she says, the job "carried a certain prestige, but at the same time it was, you know, one step above cocktail-waitressing." She cites her resentment at being forced to wear a girdle, which was then an industry-wide requirement—"I thought there was no better prescription for varicose veins than to go in a pressurized cabin with the equivalent of rubber bands around your thighs"—as one of the seeds of her subsequent activism. (Before quitting, she also forced the airline to extend its health-insurance policies to stewardesses' families.) And yet, she adds, "My concept of what women could do in the workplace was really very limited.... I look back now with awe at the blinders I had on, but it seemed to me at the time just the price of admission to the workplace in a job that was very exciting." Or, as the authors of Coffee, Tea or Me? put it, "[We] were both from small towns and anxious to take a flight at the big, bad world. That's true of most girls flying today."

Were stewardesses the first lipstick feminists? Their definition of liberation may have been full of contradictions; it may have been as much about glamour as it was self-determination; it may have bought into traditional notions of femininity with a rigor surpassing that of any cake-baking, Redbook-reading housewife of the era—it may have been feminism as only a Gabor sister could understand it. Still, you could do worse in charting what happened to women over the last 40 years than by examining the lives of stewardesses.

Most airlines have flight-attendant alumni organizations with chipper yet wistful names evoking age, or flightlessness, or both. TWA and United have Clipped Wings clubs, Continental has the Golden Penguins, National has the Sundowners, American the Kiwis (named, like the Penguins, for a flightless bird). If you attend a meeting or party given by one of these organizations, three things will happen. First, more than one still-slender, well-groomed woman in her 50s or 60s will ask if you need a drink. Second, you will meet at least one set of identical twins; ex-stewardess ranks are full of them. This is because airlines used to like twins the way farmers used to like 300-pound zucchinis (boffo photo op). And third, you will hear a lot of stories, and among them will be some common themes:

The "coffee, tea, or me?" jokes got old awfully fast.

There wasn't as much fooling around as you'd think.

Pilots were great.

Pilots were jerks.

But what you will hear more than anything else, over and over again, is how the very nature of air travel has devolved, how a mode of transportation that was once luxurious and exclusive—a "privilege," some former stewardesses say—has become, even at its best, merely endurable. Once upon a time, you may be told, boarding a plane was such an event that stewardesses took souvenir Polaroids of passengers as if they were sailing on an ocean liner or catching a dinner show. Once, there were planes and piano lounges. Once, a first-class meal might have included turtle soup served from a tureen, Chateaubriand carved seat-side, and cherries jubilee. Steaks would be cooked to order—eggs, too, on breakfast flights. This is a world that, for obvious reasons, is even harder to conjure after Sep-
I f the passengers formed an elite class, so too did the women passing out pilot lollies and carving meat with cavalier innocence. In 1965 a 20-year-old chorus girl from the Copacabana confessed to Newsweek. “I've wanted to be an airline stewardess since I was 11.” She and “several dozen sleekly tailored and equally determined young women” were interviewed while preparing to meet recruiters for United. “Right now this job means more to me than a college degree,” she explained, “or even a spot in the line with the Rockettes at Radio City.” Thus was revealed the natural pecking order among glamour-pusses.

But if many were called, few were chosen: in 1958, the dawn of the jet age, only 3 to 5 of every 100 aspiring stewardesses got the job; nine years later, TWA boasted that it hired fewer than 3 percent of its applicants—meaning it was easier for the class of 2006 to get into Harvard this year (the college’s acceptance rate was 10.5 percent) than it was to serve martinis over the Atlantic during the Johnson administration.

According to popular mythology, the airlines had distinct preferences when it came to their stewardesses. American and United were said to go for the girl-next-door or fraternity-sweetheart type. TWA and Pan Am, which flew international routes, supposedly sent the more sophisticated—or, in some eyes, snobby—sort of stewardess (or “air hostess,” the no less patronizing term TWA made a point of using). National, Braniff, and Pacific Southwest, smaller airlines with southern centers of gravity, were allegedly staffed by high-octane sexpots. As is often the case, there was some truth to the stereotypes: most of America’s stewardesses came from small towns in the South and Midwest, while Pan Am, which required knowledge of at least one foreign language, hired nearly as many European women as it did Americans. Some airlines asked for a year or two of college; some didn’t.

Having survived the initial winnowing—aside from multiple interviews, the screening process might have included I.Q. and psychological tests (if only the F.B.I. were as thorough)—potential stewardesses were dispatched to training centers for what was typically a six-week course of instruction. The facilities could be quite lavish: some had swimming pools and tennis courts; some were actually on the grounds of resorts. Given that their female charges had been selected for phenomenal impact, the schools had unique security issues. Most came equipped with curfews and guards. A few went further: the dorm-room balconies at Braniff’s International Hostess Training College in Dallas had cage-like bars, allegedly based on the dorm-room balconies at Braniff’s In-

non, which wasn’t as fancy anymore, either. We've taken away the caviar and everything else to save money. That's all to keep the fares down. People complain about it, but it's all so they can travel cheaply. And so they get what they pay for.”

“Flying then was a lifestyle that can’t be replicated,” says Jane Rosenblum, a former Pan Am stewardess. “Our old first-class passengers now have their own planes. The old economy-class are now in first class. The rest of the world,” she adds, “simply didn’t fly.”

Supervisors routinely gave “girdle checks,” a procedure that consisted of flicking an index finger against a buttock.
official history of American’s flight-stewardess corps. If you can conceive of a
cross between Acapulco and a P.O.W.
camp, that seems about right.

As for the curriculum, it was generally
divided between safety training and this
sort of thing, taken from the outline for a
1964 lecture at United’s training center:

"Ireland discovered, she was forced into a
portioned, as a young and bony Patricia
if she was on the gaunt side of well pro-
scale was not to budge—as pre-flight
weight, based on her height and figure,
those of us with faintly sallow skin look
"weigh-ins" would later ensure—and even
as if we had contracted hepatitis."

Airline to wear “sickly green” eye shadow
guide for prospective flight attendants,
were encouraged but not mandated. The
had regulation shades of nail polish and
lipstick: Revlon’s Persian Melon at TWA,
for instance. At Braniff, false eyelashes
were “grooming supervisors.” Some airlines
had clocked 17 miles. “The only glamorous
part of this job is walking through the ter-
minal,” a third stewardess complained.

And then there were the situations for
which no amount of training
could prepare one. A TWA
hostess was in the middle of the
meal service on one of
her first flights when she came
to the seats of two men who
were “fondling” each other
without benefit of a blanket.

“I had these two meal trays, and all I
could think to say was ‘Would you like
dinner now or later?’” A Pan Am stew-
ardess remembers a flight with Elizabeth
Taylor and Eddie Fisher while they were
on their honeymoon. At some point the
plane hit turbulence. “We wanted to
check their seat belts, but we didn’t dare.”
And why not? “They were under the blank-
ets—use your imagination!” (As a general
rule, even when retailing ribald anecdotes,
former stewardesses maintain a Doris
Day—like level of decorum.)

It is said that one is statistically more
likely to die crossing the street
or driving to a supermarket
than in an airplane accident.
Whether or not you take
comfort in that when board-
ing a plane, it was decidedly
not the case in 1932, when
the first stewardesses in Amer-
ica, or anywhere else, were
hired by Boeing Air Trans-
port, a forerunner of United
Airlines. At that time, pas-
engers had to worry not only
about frequent crashes but
also about sudden drops of
altitude, which, in unpres-
surized planes, could rupture
one’s eardrums. That stew-
ardesses were required to be registered
nurses and were initially outfitted with
white, hospital-style uniforms was intend-
ed to be comforting, to reassure nervous
fliers that they wouldn’t spiral into a
cornfield on the way to Grandma’s or
the anvil salesmen’s convention (though
one could just as easily imagine the med-
ical motif having the opposite effect).
It was also hoped that the fact that stew-
ardesses were women would have a gal-
vanizing effect on male passengers—not in
the Coffee, Tea or Me? sense but rather:
These girls are man enough to fly—what
are you scared of?

In terms of her more concrete functions,
an air hostess’s duties in the early 30s
might have included such pre-flight chores
as loading baggage, dusting, making sure
all the seats were screwed down tightly,
and joining in a “bucket brigade” to fuel

**OCCASIONAL PUBLIC SCANDALS**

**INVOLVING STEWARDESSES AND AIRLINE PERSONNEL ONLY ENHANCED THEIR IMAGE AS PLAYMATES WITH WINGS.**

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A. Coat: 1. How to carry properly;
   2. How to put on properly.
B. Together Look: 1. Coat always buttoned;
   2. Wear gloves; 3. Carry everything on
   one side if possible; 4. Ways to carry
   purse; 5. How to carry gloves;
   6. Scarf in summer raincoat.
C. Review: 1. Posture; 2. Standing;
   3. Walking.

If this wasn’t enough to drive her mad,
the fledgling stewardess would also be
subjected to rigorous instruction from
“grooming supervisors.” Some airlines
had regulation shades of nail polish and
lipstick: Revlon’s Persian Melon at TWA,
for instance. At Braniff, false eyelashes
were encouraged but not mandated. The
stewardess author of Flying High, a 1970
guide for prospective flight attendants,
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airline to wear “sickly green” eye shadow
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A student would be assigned an ideal
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“Weigh-ins” would later ensure—and even
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portioned, as a young and bony Patricia
Ireland discovered, she was forced into a

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If women had enlisted to escape drudg-
ery, they were disappointed to find
plenty of it in the air. An Eastern stew-
ardess described the job to Newsweek in
1968 as “food under your fingernails, sore
feet, complaints and insults.” Another
woman cited in the same article claimed
to have tied a pedometer to her leg on a
turnaround flight between Chicago and
San Francisco; by the end of the day, she
had clocked 17 miles. “The only glamorous
part of this job is walking through the ter-
minal,” a third stewardess complained.

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the plane. En route, she might have had to restrain passengers from throwing garbage and cigarette butts out open windows. These were not the glamour days that ex-stewardesses are so fond of talking about.

By the 1950s, after the introduction of faster, safer, and pressurized planes, flying had evolved into a much less dodgy proposition; passenger complaints now had more to do with lost luggage than with getting killed. At some point during the decade, the number of air passengers in America first exceeded those who traveled by train; in 1957, a similar tipping point came for transatlantic crossings by air versus sea. In those days, commercial aviation was highly regulated. Among other things, the government dictated where and when the airlines could fly and how much they could charge; on transatlantic flights even the amount of legroom and the number and type of courses that could constitute a meal were prescribed by international agreement. (In 1958 there was a minor furor over what the word “sandwich” meant after Pan Am accused some of its European competitors of stretching the definition to include virtual smorgasbords.)

With innovation so creatively discouraged, there were few ways for airlines to distinguish themselves. This was when industry leaders began to realize that the very femaleness of stewardesses was a marketable asset. (Through the 1930s and 40s, many airlines had preferred hiring male stewards, partly in emulation of train and ocean-liner service.) As The Saturday Evening Post noted in 1954, “Because service is one of the chief areas of competition among the lines, the companies increasingly are stressing the importance of the girls.”

That same year American became the first airline to impose the mandatory retirement age of 32, thereby hoping to ensure its stewardess corps’s ongoing pulchritude. It was, perhaps, a largely symbolic gesture, given that the average stewardess flew for only two years anyway, most of them quitting in order to get married—a high turnover rate that would last into the 1970s. Gwen Mahler, a former TWA hostess, is a statistical case in point: she started flying in 1955 at the age of 20, retiring a year later to marry a pilot she had met over a malted at New York’s LaGuardia Airport three months into the job. (She got the conversation rolling by admiring his uniform.)

As for colleagues who took a more careerist approach, “I can remember thinking, Oh, this gal has been flying for four, five years? I wonder what’s wrong with her?”

It was on October 26, 1958, that Pan Am flew America’s first regularly scheduled commercial jet flight, its Boeing 707 taking off for Paris from New York’s Idlewild airport. By the early 60s all the major carriers were flying jets on their most significant routes. The fastest comparable propliner, the DC-7, took more than eight hours to get from New York to San Francisco or Los Angeles. A 707 made the same trip in a little over five hours.

Not only did jets offer a faster, quieter, and smoother ride (“You’ll be able to stand a half-dollar on edge. . . . You’ll be able to hear the ticking of a watch. The flower you bought when you left will be fresh when you arrive,” gushed an ad for the 707), jets were sexy in the same early-60s way that the Kennedy administration and James Bond movies were, all kept aloft by an atmosphere of sleekness, power, and Cold War technology. For those who could afford it, jet travel made the world accessible in a way we now take for granted—and have maybe even begun to fear a bit—but was intoxicating at the time. This was when the jet set was born, when the fanchulous premise of Frank Sinatra’s “Come Fly with Me,” of casually floating down to Peru or sipping exotic booze in far Bombay on a whim, became a reality—at least for movie stars and international playboys.

This was the cultural breeze that lifted stewardesses to their apex as icons of glamour. Their uniforms had traditionally taken many of their stylistic cues from the military, but now it was time for something new in the air, and in 1965 the advertising executive Mary Wells persuaded Braniff International Airways to hire Emilio Pucci to redesign its stewardesses’ uniforms with his op-art patterns and palette of Lilly-Pulitzer-on-acid colors. He wasn’t the first name designer to dress stews (Oleg Cassini, for one, had created uniforms for TWA in the 50s), and he wasn’t being entirely fair when he observed that “most airplane stewardesses are dressed as if they were traveling by bus in the year 1925.” (Many stewardess uniforms were beautifully tailored and split an interesting difference between classicism and the stray space-age flour.) But he was the first to take the implicit come-on of the stewardess’s role and bring it into line with the new decade’s louder, more in-your-face sensibility. The airline’s ads were soon smacking their lips: “Does your wife know you’re flying with us?” Braniff’s stock, which had been trading around $24, was goosed up to $120.

“We were envious of the Braniff uniforms,” admits one former Pan Am stewardess, who along with her sisters was still stuck in wool suits that looked like “something Tippi Hedren might have worn” (as
V.F. contributing editor Laura Jacobs once put it). The owners of Braniff’s rivals were certainly envious of its stock price, and soon every carrier’s stewardesses had to have modish uniforms. Hems went up, colors got bolder, fabrics became more oil-based. United’s new outfit was punctuated by a bright orange hat that looked like a cross between a jockey’s cap and a mailbox. National promoted “uniforms that purr,” with hats and jackets made of simulated tiger fur—allegedly designed with the input of the stews themselves. The nadir, arguably, was the paper uniforms TWA introduced in 1968 to promote certain of its destinations. They came in four styles: a Roman toga, a faux-lamé miniskirt that was meant to represent Paris, “penthouse pajamas” from Manhattan, and an English “serving wench” getup. The ads promised “the end of routine travel with hostesses to match,” and this proved to be true, since there was nothing routine about watching a flight attendant whip out a roll of masking tape to repair her uniform, or, worse, catch on fire. (The uniforms’ manufacturer had quickly run through its supply of nonflammable paper). The promotion lasted just seven or eight months.

The airlines’ advertising agencies also followed the Braniff lead. Pan Am’s radio commercials asked, “How do you like your stewardesses?” as if they themselves were the cuts of meat they were cooking to order. Continental, which had long painted its planes with splashes of gold, introduced the slogan “The Proud Bird with the Golden Tail.” Since the airline’s stewardesses were dressed in golden uniforms, this was widely perceived as a clumsy double entendre in the new sex-sells climate.

This was the era of the swinging stew, first enshrined in popular culture by the 1965 play Boeing-Boeing, in which a bachelor—played by Tony Curtis in the same year’s film version—juggles three unwitting stewardess girlfriends, thanks to the miracle of dovetailing flight schedules. The subsequent success of Coffee, Tea or Me? in 1967 prompted its paperback publisher, Bantam, to exhume a dud airline novel from 1960 and republish it as Playmates with Wings. At a 1962 presentation on flight safety for Congress, a TWA flight engineer showed pictures he had taken with a hidden camera of, in newspaper columnist Jack Anderson’s description, pilots “cavorting with stewardesses in flight.” Flight attendants periodically made headlines by being arrested for prostitution. Was there a natural affinity between the two professions?

A lawyer for five such women explained the connection to The New York Times in 1971: stewardesses “meet men easily and are able to see them in the afternoon.” But a flight attendant defended her colleagues against the “unfair” assertions: “If you took all the secretaries in the Empire State Building, the percentage [also getting paid to have sex] would be about the same.”

When quizzed about the “swinging” issue, former stewardesses roll their eyes with the politest annoyance imaginable, much the way the president of a sorority house might if asked to give a disquisition on binge drinking. Oh, it may have gone on. There may have been certain “types” who went in for that sort of thing—can we talk about our charitable work now? “Well, there was as much as you wanted, that’s for sure,” says a former stewardess, the “much” being male companionship. “But among my colleagues,” she continues, “very few of them took as many chances as I did. They were more gently reared, I suppose.” Indeed, the general sense you get after talking to dozens of stewardesses is that the profession’s libidinal reputation has been oversold, an impression shared by previous reporters: as the Saturday Review assured readers in 1971, flight attendants had been “badly misjudged” and were decidedly not “vixens.”

But special mention must be made of the stewardess-pilot relationship. The airplane was a workplace in which hierarchy, thanks to the gender divide, was infused with a jolt of sex—always a provocative dynamic, as doctors and nurses will also tell you. “Buck in the 60s, we were just stupid,” says Kay Moran Tolhoek, who flew for Eastern for five years, beginning in 1962. “These captains would hit on these flight attendants right out of Arkansas or some damned place, and they’d end up having affairs for six, seven, eight years. And you knew the captain wasn’t going to divorce his wife. The majority of them were just fooling around, and it really was the naive girls that these captains zeroed in on.”

“I suppose there is as high an incidence of stewardesses involved in an affair with the married captain as there is of secretaries who have affairs with their married bosses,” writes the author of Flying High. “You are not fated to have a mad affair with a married pilot if you become an airline stewardess, but if you want to, you can certainly find an attractive one to have it with.” Attractive, maybe, but not likely a big spender: to this day, pilots are saddled with an industrywide reputation for skinflintiness and a bent toward tackier forms of moonlighting. One representative anecdote, which may put the eroticism of the pilot-stew relationship in perspective: A former stewardess remembers inviting a captain back to her place for what she thought would be a “hot date.” Instead, he arrived with Amway samples.

The 1970s proved to be as awkward a decade for air travel as they were for everything else in which taste is a consideration. A quick way to chart the industry’s growing glamour gap: In the 1970 film Airport, the stewardess heroine was played by Jacqueline Bisset, a renowned European beauty. In Airport 1975, the equivalent role went to Karen Black—as fine an actress, but also the one who could just as convincingly play a Denny’s waitress.

Reflecting the times, the airlines’ advertising was becoming increasingly crude. “It was really quite unbecoming,” says Laurie Power, “but it was part of that era, when they had nothing else left to sell. Everybody had movies, everybody had multi-course meal services, everybody had everything, you know—what else could they do?” Marketing studies said essentially the same thing. And so it was in 1971 that National introduced a slogan that soon became infamous (at least among stewardesses, who hated it): “I’m Linda [or Cheryl or whoever]. Fly me.” Building
on the momentum of its “Proud Bird with the Golden Tail” campaign, Continental
now boasted that “we really move our
tail for you.” Reinforcing this message
with unintended synergy was the 1969
film The Stewardesses, a soft-core drive-
in favorite in which it was revealed that
stewardesses spent their free time trying
on bras, showering, and practicing yoga
poses in the nude.

All of this had a cost. The sex sell, ac-
cording to Laurie Power, “subtly
changed the attitude of passengers
toward flight attend-
dants. Instead of it
being kind of a cachet
to go out with a flight
attendant, it became
‘Let’s see who can
get the flight atten-
dant for sport.’” She
remembers carrying a tray of dirty glasses
up the aisle when a
passenger stuck his business card into
a half-filled wineglass with the
invitation “Here, honey. Call me.”
Pinching incidents, and worse,
were on the upswing. “We’re the
cat’s scratching pole” is how a
Braniff stew put it at the time.
Perhaps this was all a male-
chauvinist rearguard action, be-
cause stewardesses and their un-
ion, now known as the Associa-
tion of Flight Attendants, were at
the same time pressing legal bat-
dles that would transform the job
from a two-year adventure into an
actual career. Using the leverage
of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, fed-
eral courts in 1968 had struck
down the rules forbidding mar-
rriage and forcing thirtysomethings
into retirement. In 1970, restric-
tions against flight attendants’ be-
ing pregnant were, under pres-
sure, voluntarily withdrawn by
many airlines. And in 1971, in the
decision that would arguably do
the most to put an end to the “coffee,
tea, or me?” era, the Supreme Court
ruled that airlines could not discriminate
against men.
The stewardess was now, officially, a
flight attendant. (By 1986, men would make
up 14 percent of United Airlines’ cabin
crews, to give one example.) Among other
things, this change professionalized the job
in a way that no amount of feminist cri-
tique ever could have, since no one of ei-
ther sex likely wanted to see male flight at-
tendants in paper serving-wench outfits.

At the same time, the very nature of
commercial aviation was changing. After
the time the Carter adminis-
tration deregulated the air-
lines in 1978, ushering in the
era of supersaver fares and
no-frills service, whatever
 glamour clung to the indus-
try was already as faded as
whatever glamour still clings
to the Hamptons. Passenger
loads increased, service became even
more harried and minimal, beloved air-
lines went bust, and the world of air travel
we know today—with the proverbial bag
of peanuts as luxury’s vestigial tail—was
born. Thanks to deregulation, flight atten-
dants remain perhaps the one group in
America that can still find it within them-

selves to loathe Jimmy Carter.

Mary Clare Haskin flew for United as
a stewardess between 1959 and 1961, quit
to marry, and then went back to the job
in 1974 after the rules changed. She’s still
flying today, at the age of 63, and is only
too happy to compare and contrast. It
used to be, she says, “when you told
someone you were a stewardess, you were
really something. Now you say you’re a
flight attendant and they look down upon
you. It’s almost like it’s demeaning—the
waitress in the sky or whatever. We try to
tell people we’re not really there to do
that. We’re there for their safety.” It is a
serious job, and most people now realize
that, especially after September 11. But it’s
also an increasingly irritating job, thanks
to increasingly surly passengers,
who, it must be said, have their rea-
sons, too. (The titles of two recent
flight-attendant memoirs, Around
the World in a Bad Mood! and
Plane Insanity, pretty well define
the genre’s evolution from a litera-
ture of titillation to one of griev-
ance.) The job’s old glamour, Haskin
says, “came because people made
you feel glamorous. And they don’t
anymore.” Still, she adds, “I could
never say I have regretted any min-
ute of the time I have spent as a
stewardess or flight attendant.”

You hear that again and again
from stewardesses turned flight at-
tendants, that flying just gets in
their bones, that they never lose the
wanderlust that drew them away
from small towns and circum-
scribed lives in the first place. Son-
nie Morrow Sims, for one, is now
in her 40th year with American.
She lives in Las Vegas with
her husband, Duke Sims, a
former major-league catcher
whom she met while work-
ing on the Los Angeles Dod-
gers’ private jet. “I still love
it,” she says of flying. “In
fact, I always said I was go-
ing to retire when I was 60,
and my 60th birthday was
September 11 last year—and if
that wasn’t the perfect time to
quit! And you know what? I
really imagined that sitting in your
home and watching the news
coverage of this horrible event
was the worst thing anybody could do. I
said, ‘I have to get back on an airplane.
I just—I just have to do it.’ And once I
did, I felt so empowered because I thought,
Gosh, I feel so comfortable on the air-
plane. I feel so much better.”

LADIES OF THE FLIGHT
Glamorous Air France
stewardess (Dany Saval) and
Tony Curtis in a scene from
the 1965 comedy The
Stewardesses. Boeing 707,
Coffee, Tea or Me?, the sizzling
1967 memoirs
of two stewardesses.

Coffee
Tea or Me?
The mystical union of
that time stewardesses
Troy Glover and Rafael Jones