

Day One | Wheels Up, West to East



Our journey on Alaska Air from Fresno to New York, with a stop in Seattle—covering roughly 3,100 miles—took about 12 hours, including layovers. These days, we often grumble about travel hassles, but a hundred years ago, in 1925, the fastest way from the West Coast to New York would've been by train, stretching the trip to around 4 days. We're pretty spoiled now and probably wouldn't have handled that kind of travel well.

Months ago, we booked our initial flight to arrive in New York on Sunday and spend the night, so we'd be ready to join our Egypt group at JFK International by Monday evening, the official departure day. Since we might be the only ones coming from the West Coast, we figured this plan would give us a safety net if our flights were delayed, ensuring we wouldn't miss the Egypt flight. Many in our group are arriving on Monday itself, but we wanted to play it safe.

We had our bags packed and ready a few days before the trip. Back in my business travel days, I'd throw everything into a suitcase the morning of a flight without a care—I'm not that seasoned traveler anymore! This time, we went ultra-light, which, surprisingly, took more effort to plan out what to bring. Our travel leaders drilled into us not to over-pack (something I tell myself I will not do, but end up doing), and while we don't think we've skimped too much, time will tell how it works out!



Full transparency: Carol and I aren't exactly shaking in our boots, but with recent crash stories popping up in the news, there's a slight unease about flying—and honestly, you'd probably feel it too. I won't get into a big theological discussion here—yes, I have faith, but I'm not the type to just brush it off with *"When it's your time, it's your time."* That said, we keep reminding ourselves that flying is still the safest way to travel. Every day, something like 100,000 to 150,000 commercial flights zip around the world, totaling roughly 2 million flights during the two weeks we'll be gone. Sure, anything's possible, but the odds are heavily in our favor that we'll be fine. Just like our packing, we'll see how it all plays out! So far, we've made it to New York, which is a good start.

Our day kicked off at 4:30 AM, long before the sun came up. I woke up even before the alarm. I've reached the point where I don't need one anymore—I just naturally wake up. Before the rush of travel prep took over, I watered the houseplants, which will have to fend for themselves for the next two weeks. I also brewed a cup of coffee to kick-start my brain. Yes, caffeine is a drug, but it's the only drug I consume!

Since airlines have been cutting back on serving meals, we decided to pack a small meal to enjoy after landing in Seattle—a nice treat to anticipate. Our simple brown bag meal included a couple of hamburger patties that I cooked the night before, a few hard-boiled eggs, some soft cheese, an apple and a slice of lemon bread for Carol (courtesy of our grandson Deacon).

We rolled into Fresno's airport by 6: 45 AM, plenty of time for our 8:17 AM flight to Seattle.



As the sun began to rise, it cast a soft blue glow over the snow-capped Sierra mountains—a stunning sight that made waking up so early feel worthwhile. I really appreciate our little Fresno airport; it's small, clean, and easy to get around. Flying out of Fresno costs more, but it's only five miles from home and super convenient. TSA was a breeze. It only took 15 minutes from the parking lot to the gate—and the staff were genuinely friendly, smiling like they meant it. I'd planned to grab another coffee at the gate, but after the cup and a half I had at home, I was already maxed out on caffeine. I opted to wait for a Starbucks brew later in Seattle.

The Alaska Airlines two-engine regional jet for this leg felt spacious, especially since I'd upgraded to their "Premium" seating, which gives an extra four inches of legroom. It might not sound like much, but those few inches honestly make a big difference.



We took off to the south and made a u-turn east and then north. Out of our window, the snow packed Sierras faded into the distance, and I couldn't help but feel that mix of gratitude and excitement.



The flight was smooth most of the way, with only a couple minutes of *perspiration-inducing-turbulence*. We snagged a table to enjoy our packed lunch. I picked up a hot latte, and we hung out for a couple of hours until our next flight to New York.



Boarding to New York was smooth too. We boarded with all the *muckety-mucks* since we had the upgraded ticket.



Carol had a middle seat, and I had an aisle so I could stretch out my poor, tired knee. Our window seatmate was a man in about his 50s. He was already seated and as we crawled into our seats I said to him, "You don't look like you're a troublemaker so I think we are okay." I set him up for the perfect response. He replied, "Oh, I'm actually a real troublemaker." He was a great guy to sit with. He lives in Seattle, but he and his wife have a home in Israel too. They are both Jews. We talked about the horrific actions of the Arabs who live in Gaza (Brief political rant: Gaza is not Palestine. There is no Palestine). He told us his wife weeps often about the atrocities that are still taking place. We enjoyed a few brief conversations with him throughout the trip.

The young woman seated across from me on the aisle was reading a book most of the trip. When we landed I said to her, "It is unusual to see someone, especially a young person, reading an actual book these days!" She laughed and said, "Yes, and I had to bring the thickest one this time!" She said that she saw me reading my Kindle and that she usually travels with hers, but this time she decided to bring a book. I asked her how many books she reads in a year. She said, "My goal is 52, but I've never reached that yet!" That is a lot of reading. I told her my goal for 2025 is 27. It was fun to talk about reading. Many people don't read. Asking someone what genre of books they like to read, or what they are currently reading, is a great conversation starter.

As soon as we stepped off the plane, two friendly airport workers guided us toward the taxi stand. Being in New York, we knew we had to hop into one of those iconic big yellow cabs—it's practically a rite of passage. Finding one was easy; we just followed the signs to the taxi stand, where a dispatcher pointed us to a waiting cab.



But our driver? Not exactly the friendly type. He barely said a word, and when I gave him the hotel name and address, he stared at me like I'd handed him a riddle. One would think a cab driver at the airport would know where all the hotels are located. Even after plugging it into his GPS, he didn't inspire much confidence, but off we went.

The hotel was barely a mile from the airport—back home, I'd checked Google Maps, and the route was straightforward as could be. Still, despite heading in the right general direction, he suddenly pulled over in front of some empty building. "*Uh, this isn't the hotel,*" I said, and he just frowned at his GPS, looking lost. I pulled out my phone, punched in the directions myself, and told him to follow them—he'd been off by half a mile. I spotted the hotel up ahead and pointed, "*There it is!*" He grumbled, "*I can't make a U-turn here,*" so we looped a couple more blocks while the meter ticked up. What should've been a \$15 ride landed at \$25. No point in arguing; he knew he'd botched it, and Carol figured he was embarrassed. I tossed him a \$5 tip, anyway. I'm always a big spender at the beginning of a trip!

Double the fare for a short trip? Sure—but getting a little lost in New York was priceless, and honestly kind of fun.

When we checked into our hotel, I told the attendant that our taxi driver got lost bringing us here from the airport to which she replied, "*How convenient!*" She's a real New Yorker and knows how it works.

It is morning now as I write this (Hopefully not too mundane) journal. We requested a late

checkout of 3 PM. Our flight leaves New York for Istanbul at 8:05 PM. We'll have a lot of waiting at the airport, but it's all part of the travel experience!

I'm not sure when I will get a chance post again, but until then, thanks for reading.