

Urban travel legends

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From the traditional myths and truths about hotels, key cards and the secret airline code to the trendy, budget and luxury rooms for everyone

Business travelers are a secretive, clannish lot, and we take perverse pride in knowing the picayune details of how life works on the road. If there's an airline rule, we claim to know and maybe even understand it. A strange hotel policy? We feign indifference and insist we heard about it years ago.

Then there are those persistent factoids that can only be classified as Urban Travel Legends. They're usually not true - or at least they haven't been true for quite some time - yet they continue to clutter our database of travel knowledge. Here are several of the most enduring legends, along with some clear-eyed facts.

The airline secret code

The hardest-to-kill legend is the claim that you'll receive special treatment from an airline only if you utter the secret code 'Rule 240.' Whenever your flight is canceled or seriously delayed, the story goes, simply ask the gate agent to Rule 240 you, and the airline will magically place you, at no additional cost, on the next available flight of any other carrier flying the route.

The problem? There is no Rule 240, at least not anymore. Rule 240 was shorthand for an old Civil Aeronautics Board regulation that required airlines to immediately place you on another flight, regardless of the fare you originally paid or the carrier you originally booked. But the C.A.B. and its rules disappeared after the airlines were deregulated in 1978.

Today, carriers set their own rules, and they're laid out in the 'contract of carriage' buried in the fine print on airline Web sites. You agree to the contract when you buy a ticket, and most carriers have terms similar to the jargon imposed by Delta Air Lines. Delta's contract promises nothing, it even specifically disavows its responsibility to place you on the flight with the date, time, and destination printed on your ticket. As for getting help if your flight is grounded, lots of luck. According to Delta, any assistance is 'at our sole discretion.'

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