

# Reporter's Notebook

Alex Friedrich



## THANKS FOR FLYING SIBERIA AIR, COMRADE

*Herald reporter Alex Friedrich is on temporary assignment with the Moscow bureau of Knight Ridder Newspapers. He recently flew to the Republic of Georgia to interview Eduard Shevardnadze, the last Soviet foreign minister.*

**M**OSCOW — I have my first doubts when I check in at the airport. Lots of passengers have "locked" their satchels and bags by shrink-wrapping them in bright blue plastic sheeting. What's in there is anyone's guess.

My Georgian fellow passengers at the check-in desk are unshaven men in black T-shirts and leather jackets. They speak loudly and flare their nostrils.

My driver warns me to keep hold of my money and my passport. Mafia everywhere at the airport, he says.

I walk to the gate to wait for my flight, a non-stop on Siberia Air, a new company that broke away from the Soviet airline Aeroflot.

Who boards first is not determined by row. It is a cattle call.

When I finally board the plane, it smells of old cigarettes and stale upholstery.

I have an aisle seat near the front, but I overshoot it. It's so crowded I have to go to the tail and wait for everyone else to board.

People crowd in with oversized boxes — stereos, TVs, and other gifts for the folks back home. They try to shove them in the teeny overhead compartments, but most don't fit. So they just stick them wherever they can, in the aisle or pile them near the emergency exit.

When space clears, I go to my seat, 4D.

It's taken.

I show my ticket to the steward.

No, no, he says, shaking his head.

I point to the 4D on my ticket. I point to the 4D on my seat.

No, no, no.

He's impatient.

A flight attendant offers me a middle seat stuck between a sweaty businessman and a Russian hairdresser.

I go back to the tail. I sit and pile my stuff around me.

I wait to see how the Russians pull off their little safety demonstration, but there is none.

Eating could be a problem. I have to share a seat-tray with the guy next to me. It's one of those trays that's attached to the seat in front. I have a hard time wrenching it out of its slot. When I do, I notice its paint is peeling off, and it won't lay level.

A bored-looking flight attendant hands out plastic cups half full of Russian champagne. The passengers' faces light up. I set my empty cup on my eating tray and watch it slide off.

I go to the bathroom. It reeks of urine and cigarette smoke. I do my business and go back to my seat. Water begins to drip from the ceiling. It also drips from the emergency exit near me. A ceiling tile dangles over the aisle.

After a couple of long hours, we start to land.

The passengers clap when the wheels touch the runway. Then everyone leaps up and starts opening the overhead compartments and grabbing luggage. The plane is still shooting down the runway at 200 mph. For the next few minutes the plane is like a bus, with standing passengers swaying left and right as the plane makes its way to the gate.

I look out the window and notice a few German words and flags. They are on the sides of the planes and emergency vehicles that the Germans used up and sold to the Georgians.

As we pull in, I look to the left and notice a dog snoozing in the middle of the next lane. His buddies play near the runway.

I am in Tbilisi.