

# Travel Talk – Handling Jet Lag

by Chase Binder

Bud and I knew nothing about jet lag the first time we flew to Europe. It was back around 1990 and we thought it would be a snap to grab an overnight flight, arrive in Switzerland, hit the slopes shortly after arrival and then proceed to enjoy ourselves as if we had just traveled up to New Hampshire's own little Switzerland, The Balsams. After a week of fun, we planned to fly home from Zurich late Sunday then report for work bright eyed and bushy-tailed Monday morning.

It didn't go that way. While we did acclimate pretty well in Zermatt (the excitement of being there no doubt a factor), getting back into our work schedules once we got home was a challenge. We were grumpy, tired and generally out of sorts. Aha...jet lag! More technically, our sleep-wake cycles (circadian rhythms) were disrupted. We had traveled six time zones each way...gaining on the way east and losing on the way home. Sadly, our brains didn't just wind and unwind our internal clocks.

Over the past 30 years jet travel has increased exponentially. The number of people experiencing jet lag has skyrocketed. Scientific research has blossomed. Current theories combine knowledge of how the body reacts to being trapped in an aluminum tube flying 35,000 feet above earth at 500 mph for hours on end with knowledge of how to use the clock and light to scientifically adjust your circadian rhythms.

But let's start with human body in that aluminum tube. Aside from the general cleanliness of the surfaces you touch (tray tables and armrests are obviously not sanitized in between flights), the air you breathe whilst airborne is recirculated. Oh, it may be filtered and all that, but it is dry, dry, dry and there are all those people around you—breathing in, breathing out. So, start a day or two ahead of time and hydrate, hydrate, hydrate. Once you're on the plane, keep hydrating—and don't forget wipes to clean off the hard surfaces. Avoiding alcohol, caffeine and sleeping pills is also supposed to be on your checklist—all can impact your ability to sleep. These are all things you should do whether you're a 3-hour flight to Miami or an 8-10-hour flight to Europe.

Now to overlay the protocols about light and the clock. They



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say you should start by getting a good night's sleep before flying a long-haul flight. I always chuckle at this one. Do you know anyone...and I do mean anyone...who sleeps like a baby before flying off to another continent? I don't! So, let's set that one aside.

Research has shown that it takes about one day to fully adjust to each time zone traveling east and a day and a half for every time zone traveling west. Interesting! Also problematic for anyone going to Europe for a week or ten days, let alone Australia for two weeks. Your vacation evaporates!

How do you soften the blow? The Mayo Clinic ([www.healthletter.MayoClinic.com](http://www.healthletter.MayoClinic.com)) recommends using your clock to control light exposure, because circadian rhythms are all about light cycles. For eastward travel, go to bed 30-60 minutes earlier for 3 nights before flying, avoid light during the evening (including electronic devices) and get lots of light in the morning. For westward travel, do the opposite. Go to bed 30-60 minutes later, wake up later and avoid light for a couple of hours (they suggest wearing sunglasses). Stay off your phone or tablet. This may be science-based, but neither Bud nor I (nor anyone else we have ever met) have actually done this. Not to say it wouldn't work. If this type of scheduling appeals to you, try [www.jetlagrooster.com](http://www.jetlagrooster.com) for help.

What else can you do? The Mayo Clinic suggests "locking into the local time." Start by adjusting your watch to the time at your destination as soon as you're on the plane. Then, try and get some sleep—using whatever sleep aids you need. Your physician or pharmacist might be a help. Noise canceling headphones are great. Bud always travels with a sleep mask (though I don't). Think about pillows/blankets/

footrests. I always fly long hauls with a pashmina, a large, soft scarf that can be a blanket or a pillow roll and wraps around my shoulders to cover a crumpled shirt on arrival. The more comfortable you are, the better your chance of sleeping.

When you arrive in, say, London or Rome, go with the local time. If it's morning, have breakfast and go about your day. Fit in a quick nap if you can later, but otherwise stick to the local schedule. Have dinner when they have dinner. Go to sleep and wake up when they do. Honestly, after all the traveling we have done (99 countries and 6 continents), this works best for us. We often plan a somewhat light schedule the first 2 days or so of our trips (typically 3-4 weeks), but otherwise hit the ground running.

Most of this advice applies to your outbound journey. Coming home, whether flying eastward or westward, has different confounding variables—at least in our experience. The trip is over, work routines and endless paperwork loom ahead. Unpacking. Laundry. Is it any wonder that we're out of sorts, want to sleep a lot when we should be awake and are wide awake fretting at 3 AM? Best to just power through it!

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