

ABOUT MY LAST FLIGHT

# Ups and downs on United front

SUSAN BREDOW

**Airline:** United **Date:** February 6  
**Flight no:** UA 870 **Route:** Sydney-San Francisco **Departure time:** 4.25pm (on time) **Seat:** 2K **Class:** First **Aircraft:** Boeing 747-400



UNTIL this flight, I've not flown United other than on domestic US routes where even its first class could be generously described as "rustic". On one flight up the front, to paraphrase comedian Shelley Berman, I was offered coffee, tea or milk, but when I asked for a martini I was told they had forgotten to load the beverage trolley.

I've heard negative stories about United on the trans-Pacific route: cancelled flights, rude cabin crew, poor in-flight entertainment and the nickname "Untied". I'm most concerned about the entertainment because the only thing I'm aware I've left out while packing is my book.

In Sydney, United shares Air New Zealand's lounge, where I find enough vodka in an almost drained bottle to mix a bloody mary and then hunt for a seat in the crowded room. Once aboard and comfortably settled with a glass of Henriot Brut Millesime 1998, I sum up the three cabin crew as someone's mum, someone's divorcee sister and someone's groovy granny.

They are attentive without being intrusive, which is good because before too long I am focused on a cool film from the movies-on-demand selection. *Jack Goes Boating* stars that most unlikely romantic lead, Philip Seymour Hoffman. That I'm reclined about 2m from the picture doesn't matter because at almost 40cm wide the screen is plenty big enough to see from a generous distance. All entertainment offerings are better than expected but, rather than sound-cancelling headphones, those supplied are toy-like and used in all three cabin classes. Good thing I carry my own because they dull engine noise and I can comfortably sleep while wearing them.

The first-class amenities kit contains a useful array of eye-shades, toothpaste and toothbrush, mouthwash, tissues, skincare samples from Murad, hand sanitiser, earplugs and socks. So far, very good.

Dinner, however, is disappointing. Airlines today compete for premium passengers with in-flight dining experiences resembling those found in the world's best restaurants. The menu this evening is a choice of chicken breast with tomato coulis, filet mignon, poached salmon or sweet potato and

leek ravioli. Before the main is served there's a bizarre Asian dim-sum concoction with dollops of a viscous synthetic-tasting sauce that completely misfires. The broccoli soup that comes next is whisked away before I finish it and the large green salad that follows is made of leaves so tough and aged I am relieved when it is removed.

My filet mignon is swimming in gravy and accompanied by overcooked and watery zucchini and one lonely piece of yellow squash. It's astonishing to think this produce comes from, and has presumably been spoiled in, Australia. Dessert is just a couple of scoops of ice cream with chocolate sauce. There's a selection of cheeses and fresh grapes and during the night packaged snacks and fresh fruit are laid out for the taking.

And so to sleep. The first-class seat is comfy and long enough but doesn't seem particularly wide. Something is not quite right; I wake often with pins and needles in my arms and legs and learn next morning the armrests can be lowered to create a larger sleeping space. I had asked one of the cabin crew how the seat operated but she had replied she did not know.

Different faces come out after lights-out to refill water bottles (after saying there is a limit of one bottle a passenger) and find me an extra blanket (after saying there is one a passenger).

After breakfast (poached eggs with tomato or fresh fruit and yoghurt), I arrive in San Francisco in excellent shape and ready to catch my next United flight to the ski slopes.

**Bouquets:** While the lights are up, slightly eccentric but very genuine under-home service.

**Brickbats:** Where's the quality control on the meals? The eye-shades in the amenities kit smell of chemicals.

**Insider tip:** Qantas's recent withdrawal from the route makes United the only airline to fly direct from Australia to San Francisco.

**Best deal:** For departures Monday-Thursday, United has a business-class special for 50-day advance purchase fares from \$5183 (\$595 to Los Angeles).

*About My Last Flight is an occasional column by T&I staff and key contributors.*

{ THE MOVE AND GROOVE TEST }



Santiago de Cuba moves to the rhythm of its salsa dancers as they twirl and shimmy the days and nights away

PHOTOLIBRARY

# It's all about the salsa

Dancing, gossiping and flirting are part of life in Santiago de Cuba

JANE CORNWELL

THE telephone rings a lot in Santiago de Cuba. "HOLA?" answers Anna, settling her ample rear on a kitchen stool for yet another chat. "Dime," she says into the receiver. "Tell me."

It's the morning after my rum-soaked night before; the grapevine has swung into action early, just as it does every morning in this *casa particular*, the state-sanctioned private homestays that offer visitors the chance of an authentic slice of everyday life in cash-strapped and contradiction-filled Cuba.

Everyday life in Santiago — Cuba's easternmost and most musical city — starts as it means to go on, which is loudly. Roosters crow. Engines rev. People yell. Sleeping-in is a luxury afforded the deaf or comatose; Anna's sausage dog yaps excitedly when I emerge, blearily, from my room, with its nylon bedspread, noisy bar fridge and ensuite complete with cockroach that only seems to scurry away when I'm naked.

The extended family is up, of course: Anna's elderly father is watching baseball on a television set a couple of decades old. Her adult daughter is doing the ironing in a pair of denim shorts and yellow thongs, one of which is broken.

Most of the phone calls seem to be from other women with *casa particulares* located around Parque Cespedes, Santiago's main pedestrian square and local hang-out. Women such as Irma, with her indoor courtyard and collection of porcelain kitsch.

Or Marbelis, with her rooftop view of the city, the sea and the nearby Sierra Maestra. Or Odalis, who does glittery manicures in her front room for a peso and lives directly across the road. Women who appear to stay largely indoors, keeping their eyes on the

street — with its 50s cars and traffic fumes, neon Lycra and non-stop flirting — and their ears to the phone.

"You went dancing in many different places last night," announces Anna, plonking a tortilla under my nose. "Casa de la Trova, Casa de la Musica, Bar Claqueta..."

Smiling, she counts off the venues on her fingers. I splutter into my coffee. How does she know? Am I being monitored by secret tourist police? Is there a Cuban neighbourhood watch?

"Odalis just told me," says Anna with a smile. "Your friend just told her at breakfast."

My friend is one of a group who've come to dance salsa in Santiago, birthplace of *son*, the slow, elegant precursor to salsa. Not fond of tourist hotels and tired of clumsy-footed dance partners, we've come here under the aegis of Caledonia Languages, a British-based specialist tour operator with links to Santiago and its premier Afro-Cuban dance ensemble, Ballet Folklorico Cutumba; we are ensured a dance holiday with a difference.

Forget dancing with another learner: for three hours a day we each have Cuban partners with whom we twirl and shimmy, who act as Latin Patrick Swayzes to our wannabe Jennifer Greys.

A light-hearted sexual frisson pervades all our classes; this is Cuba. It's in the water. Western notions of political correctness are pushed blithely to one side.

"Mi amor!" ("My love!") coos my salsa partner Alexi each morning, as we run about the foyer of the Teatro Marti, a musty art-deco theatre that serves as our dance school. "Relax, *princesa*, just follow me," he says during classes on the theatre's tilted stage. "Ay!" yells salsa teacher



PHOTOLIBRARY

Dining, drinking and music at Casa de la Trova

Cheche when I get tangled during a particularly fast *sombrero complicado* and land, with a bounce, on my bum.

"Your poor *culo*," he says, giving it a pat. I nail the move immediately afterwards.

Post-revolution the Castro government tried to counter the influence of US mass culture by funding traditional Afro-Cuban cultural groups such as Cutumba, whose professional dance recitals — all bare chests and bandannas, props and frilly skirts — explore traditional dance forms from the island's West African and Haitian cultures. That some of these groups now teach salsa to Western tourists is just one of Cuba's little ironies; though perhaps not as ironic as the fact that many Cutumba members adore American hip-hop and prefer the delights of this self-contained provincial city, by its friendliness and nightlife, its relentless rhythms and good-natured close-up dancing. Lured by the traditional *piropos* (compliments)

and hairdressers. For most it's as instinctive as walking. "Dance!" cries Anna one evening, putting a CD on the ghetto-blaster and shoving her dark-eyed adult son in my direction.

Her dad duly claps out the two-three beat of the clave (the hardwood stick that is the backbone of salsa music) from the sofa while her daughter, though seltotaped, does the basic step in a corner. So what if homestays have scratchy towels, missing toilet seats or wires protruding from walls? It's all part of the experience.

Later, as I head up the street to meet friends at the Casa Grande (a stately hotel featured in a Graham Greene novel), I look up to see my new Cuban family waving and smiling from their balcony.

Some in our group are seasoned returnees, long seduced by the delights of this self-contained provincial city, by its friendliness and nightlife, its relentless rhythms and good-natured close-up dancing. Lured by the traditional *piropos* (compliments)



PHOTOLIBRARY

Teatro Marti, a musty theatre that serves as a dance school



ent ring tones so that they don't mistake the girlfriend from England for the girlfriend from France or Australia." Anna tells me with a sniff. Having the Cutumba dancers with us on our evenings out keeps things breezy, not sleazy.

With their entry to clubs paid out of Caledonia's group kitty (the average Cuban wage is about \$US10 a month) our fabulous crew pull out our chairs, ward off unwanted male attention, whiz us around the dance floor and even see us home, walking on the road side of the pavement so we're not squashed by a passing rusty Oldsmobile or Cadillac.

Inevitably, some of us get closer to our dance partners than others. Caledonia has been the catalyst for innumerable infatuations and eight marriages; dancers from other Afro-Cuban dance ensembles — Oriente, Tuarte — have had to supplement Cutumba's ranks. But all those who travel to Cuba with Caledonia come, first and foremost, for the dancing and with the aim of returning home more co-ordinated and confident and, well, more Cuban than when they left.

The mojitos and Cuba libres help; rum o'clock comes earlier and earlier as the holiday goes on. My dancing, though perhaps not my spinning, only gets better.

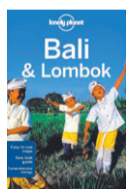
"I think I drank a lot of rum last night," I tell Anna sheepishly, as she takes my half-eaten tortilla from the table.

"Yes," she says with a good-natured shrug. "I heard."

Jane Cornwell was a guest of Caledonia Languages. [www.caledonialogues.com](http://www.caledonialogues.com)

{ A LITTLE FLIGHT READING }

**Bali & Lombok**  
By Ryan Ver Bermoes and Iain Stewart  
Lonely Planet, \$39.99



Lonely Planet guidebooks have a fresh look this year with less cluttered layouts, smarter maps (including reasonably detailed street guides of busy precincts such as Seminyak and Kerobokan, Kuta and Legian) and trip planners full of insider tips. In the latest Bali & Lombok title, there are 62 maps, clearly delineated chapters on the main areas of interest and a survival guide to health, tipping, cultural taboos, food, language and all the usual

nitty-gritty. There's also a nicely illustrated listing of the top 25 experiences, but it's all about the pictures as these must-do inclusions are too generic to be of much value to anyone but the novice Bali visitor. Want to go to a spa? Try the seafood restaurants on the beach at Jimbaran Bay? Lonely Planet offers PDF chapter downloads at [shop.lonelyplanet.com](http://shop.lonelyplanet.com) (average price \$3.50), which is a handy option for the short-stay tourist. Bali is very much back in vogue with Australian travellers. Recent statistics show a 46 per cent increase during the past 12 months, so expect to see copies of this new (and eminently portable) book under many a bronzed wing in Kuta, Ubud and beyond.

ALEXANDRA JAMES

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