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Winter Festivals: Fire and Ice

Posted on Jan 29, 2007 08:00 PM by [kristin](#)



There are two approaches to throwing a party to get through the darkest and coldest part of winter: you can embrace the freeze with ice sculptures, ice castles, ice what-have-you, or, you can try to beat back the cold with brute force by burning as many things as possible.

Taking the path of least resistance: [Harbin, China](#) and [Quebec, Canada](#). Harbin is in far northeastern China, further north than the dreary Russian port of Vladivostok, and has freezing temperatures for nearly half the year. The locals make the most of it, though, with the world's largest [Ice and Snow Sculpture Festival](#), which they've hosted every winter since 1985. Running from January 5 through mid-to-late February, this year's edition features 2,000 ice sculptures, [illuminated replicas of landmark buildings made of stacked ice blocks](#), and mammoth snow-sculpture of Niagara Falls. Smaller in scale, but closer to home, Quebec city's [Winter Carnival](#) distinguishes itself with snow baths (??), snow slides, cross-country skiing, dogsled races, and their mascot, the creepy, [Stay-Puft-Marshmallow-Man-like Bonhomme Carnaval](#).

The residents of [Scotland's Shetland](#) islands, on the other hand, won't take their cold, dreary winter lying down. On the last Tuesday of every January (that would be Tuesday, the 30th), towns throughout Shetland give themselves over to the fire festival cryptically known as [Up Helly Aa](#), an event that's one-part Victorian invention, and one-part recognition of the area's deep Nordic, pagan roots (Shetland is closer to [Norway](#), than to Scotland). The largest event takes place in Lerwick, where nearly 1,000 torch-bearers parade through the darkened streets at nightfall. The torch-bearers are divided into 40 all-male crews, each with matching costumes, and are lead by the "Jarl" and his men, who have spent the previous year making meticulously detailed [Viking](#) outfits, and a model longship. The crews proceed through the town, with the longship in tow, and at a designated point they all circle round and pitch their torches into it, burning it to the ground. Then the focus shifts to parties that rage til dawn, held in every large space all over town. The crews visit each fest in turn, performing a song or skit at each one, with drinks on the house. Ain't no party like a Viking party.

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Swedish Embassy to Open in Second Life

Posted on Jan 30, 2007 04:30 PM by [kristin](#)

Yesterday a post about an ancient [Viking outpost](#), and today I hear that the tech-savvy descendants of those same Vikings are colonizing the virtual world. The [Swedish Institute](#) (SI), an organization charged with promoting Swedish culture in all forms, has [announced](#) that they'll be creating an "embassy" within the online multi-user world of [Second Life](#). Second life claims over 3 million "inhabitants", who construct avatars and environments for themselves, interact with other users and conduct business in the site's "Linden dollars." The Second Life embassy wouldn't provide visas or passports for traveling in the offline world, but would offer information about how to obtain them, and generally act as an information portal for Sweden. "Second Life allows us to inform people about [Sweden](#) and broaden the opportunity for contact with Sweden easily and cheaply," said SI director Olle Waestberg. Of



course, if anyone's avatar can go to "Sweden" without having to cross a border or get on a plane, is it really worth the trouble and expense of paying for a stamp on your fusty ol' paper passport? (via [Boing Boing](#))

– "[Sweden to set up embassy in Second Life](#)" (The Local)

Previously:

– "[Stockholm: The Musical](#)"

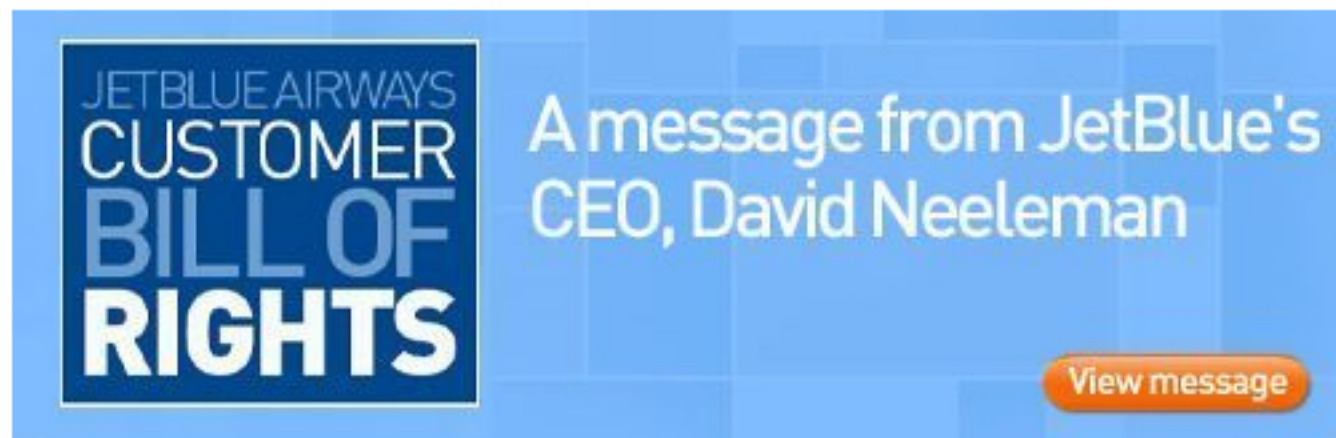
Location: [Sweden](#)

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Jet Blues

Posted on Feb 20, 2007 04:45 PM by [kristin](#)



Poor [JetBlue](#) – the friendly little budget-carrier-that-could has spent the past week [publicly flailing](#). The poop hit the jet engine (with predictably nasty results) when a Valentine's Day winter storm caused scheduling and communications breakdowns that left several planes full of passengers stranded on the tarmac at JFK for up to ten hours. For an airline with low overhead, the backup of so many planes and flight crews, and the resulting backlash that downed their reservations system, so thoroughly scrambled operations that flight cancellations kept rolling through the weekend as they struggled to catch up. Just yesterday, JetBlue canceled 139 of 600 flights scheduled to ferry fliers home after a busy long weekend, just to restore some order. JetBlue CEO David Neeleman has gone on record declaring himself "[humiliated and mortified](#)" at his company's inability to cope with the situation. But all hope is not lost for the airline once famed for its customer service; Neeleman has responded to the crisis by declaring an industry first: a passengers' "[Bill of Rights](#)" for JetBlue fliers that would ensure major financial rewards for anyone "seriously inconvenienced" by this type of snafu in the future. (See a video message about this from Neeleman [here](#).) Prior to this, airlines have hidden behind an "[act of god](#)" out-clause to protect themselves from weather-induced operations problems. According to [CNN](#), California Representative Michael Thompson is seizing this opportunity to introduce a bill in congress that would hold all commercial carriers to the same standard.

- "[JetBlue's C.E.O. Is 'Mortified' After Fliers Are Stranded](#)" ([NYT](#))
- "[JetBlue cancels more flights into Monday as it struggles with storm aftermath](#)" ([USA Today](#))
- "[More JetBlue flights canceled Monday](#)" ([MSNBC](#))
- [JetBlue Customer Bill of Rights](#) ([JetBlue.com](#))
- "[JetBlue debacle spurs passenger rights bill in congress](#)" ([CNN](#))
- "[JetBlue Introduces Passenger's 'Bill of Rights'](#)" ([inFlightHQ](#))

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Why We Need a Passengers' Bill of Rights

Posted on Feb 22, 2007 09:01 PM by [kristin](#)

Tapping into the [JetBlue hoopla](#), MSNBC travel columnist [Christopher Elliott responded today](#) to one Vinit Desai, who had sit through 30 hours of delays after his scheduled American Airlines SF-to-Chicago flight was canceled because of weather. Desai wanted to know why AA agents attended to passengers booked on later delayed flights before him, and why, it seemed, that help was being meted out so unevenly. The sad answer? According to AA, those other passengers were on flights delayed by "mechanical problems" – basically anything an airline will cop to being at fault for. Most airlines' conditions of carriage include a section called [Rule 240](#), which stipulates all sorts of protections – hotels, meal vouchers, compensation – for passengers stranded or delayed by operational screw-up. Those inconvenienced by an "act of god," however, like the ice storm that recently put most of [JetBlue's planes and staff into the deep freeze](#), generally aren't guaranteed anything. In Desai's case, though his initial delay was caused by weather, mechanical problems on other flights prevented agents from getting him back en route for 30 hours. Where's the justice in that? Though the form it may take is still kind of vague, a proposed [Bill of Rights](#) for air travelers might help passengers in similar situations, who have been seriously delayed by a combination of both [Force Majeure](#) and *Force Stupide*.



- ["You call that a weather delay?"](#) (MSNBC)
- ["ASTA responds to call for passenger Bill of Rights"](#) (Travel Daily news)
- ["JetBlue Unveils "Passengers Bill Of Rights""](#) (Consumer Affairs)
- ["JetBlue Tries to Straighten Its Wings"](#) (NPR Podcast)

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Romance, Relationships and Traveling

Posted on Feb 12, 2007 09:00 PM by [kristin](#)

I'm a firm believer that the true test of any relationship (platonic or romantic) is surviving traveling together. You don't really *know* someone until you're thrown on each other's sole company for days, living in close quarters with his or her quirks, habits and shortcomings. But traveling as a couple is really a trial by fire. Nothing can take the glow off a trip that's supposed to be idyllic faster than watching your significant other morph into a micro-manager, germaphobe, or expert in stereotypes when their comfort zone is challenged. Some people's idea of a perfect trip is maxing out at the hotel, lingering over meals, and generally doing as little as possible, while others won't be happy unless they're making the most of every minute they're away from home. But without a little discussion beforehand, you might not find these things out until you actually get to your destination, and then, woe betide you. So, in honor of [Valentine's Day](#) and the many couples who may be stepping out of the frying pan on their first trip together, here's some food for thought:



– Backpacker guru [Rolf Potts](#), in his most recent [Yahoo column](#), weighs-in with ten factors all couples traveling together should consider, including the very key number five, *The Space Factor*: **“Do you expect to spend every moment of the trip together, or can you be independent of one another as a couple? Are you both prepared to deal with constant companionship? Should too much time together become tedious, can you both empathetically communicate the need to be solitary for a few hours?”**

– For a look at how an actual couple on the road dealt with these issues, check out Elizabeth Koch's [“World Tour Compatibility Test”](#) at [Memoirville](#). Elizabeth and her boyfriend Todd Zuniga, both editors of [Opium](#), a literary humor magazine, went around the world together as a way to decide whether their relationship was at an end, or, if they should move in together. In 10 installments, Koch chronicles the trip in refreshingly honest detail, but I won't spoil the cliffhanger for you.

– Hannah Betts at the London *Times*, however, claims to have had a bust-up in pretty much every romantic destination out there, and is sick of the whole process. Her advice? [“Valentines? Paah, travel alone”](#).

Previously:

– [“The Map: Valentine's Day”](#)