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How much baggage should a man carry?

By SUSAN AGER
Free Press Columnist

A note from Susan: I simply like this one.

Beside me on the plane, the businessman folds his suit coat and lays it on the seat between us. I can see his undershirt through his shirt. With his gold Cross pen he fills out a crossword puzzle he has clipped from the morning paper.

When the peanuts arrive, I offer him mine. He tucks them into his suit coat pocket along with his own. "Thanks," he says ruefully. "They'll probably be my lunch."

The plane is full of men like him, dressed in varying shades of blue, gray and white. Navy blue. Oxford blue. Pinstriped gray. I watch as one, balding, reads every word of a newspaper story headlined "A good cry would do men good, experts say." Then he folds the paper, stuffs it in the seat-back pocket, tilts his head back and closes his eyes.

Most of the men sleep. They are tired or there is no reason to keep their eyes open.

For them, it is too late to escape.

They are trapped by obligations, by affluence and by age.

Only a duffel bag

A few days earlier, I spent an hour on a 22-foot catamaran flying over the waters of the Florida Everglades at 40 miles per hour with a young man named Jesse.

He was barely 20 when he escaped his family's beef cattle farm in tiny Ashland, Wis., and found his way down to Key Largo. "I love the water," he told us as it washed up in great sprays to douse us.

My husband and I paid him \$70 for one hour on the catamaran. He told us his wardrobe fits in a duffel bag. He told us in summer the water temperature reaches 90 degrees. He told us where he races Hobie Cats, and where he and his friends drink beer.

He has a good life. He has no dependents. He has no baggage.

He flies alone.

He has applied for a spot on a research ship run by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. He wants to be a seaman because, he said, he loves the water -- even, he expects, when it will be mean and cold.

For the time being, he sweats and tans and gets washed with salt water for a living. And chats with tourists enchanted by his life. He takes showers on the beach, cold-water only, that cool his skin.

I wonder how long his freedom will last. I wonder if as he approaches 30 his freedom begins to seem self-indulgent and un-American. Maybe a woman tames him. Maybe he gets a "real" job, one with security, health insurance and retirement benefits. Maybe by 40 he's wearing a tie to work and flying to distant cities with a briefcase in one hand and a cell phone in the other.

A full suitcase

I wonder if any of the men on this plane ever sailed a catamaran. I wonder if they ever lived light, or want to now.

How many times, in the moonlight, have they packed a duffel bag?

For most of them, it's too late to leave. Too much rests on them. Too many people rely on them.

They are responsible men. They carry everyone's baggage. They'll carry it as long as they must.

I doubt they nurse regrets. Regret could paralyze you when you need to keep moving. Maybe they assure themselves that they've relinquished freedom for valuable things a guy like Jesse doesn't have: Family. Stability. Affluence, of sorts.

Jesse's too young and too stupid to appreciate such a tradeoff, these men might well think.

I watch them doze, their chins against their chests, their watches keeping time on their wrists, lost for 15 minutes in their dreams.