

# KIM!

INSIDE HER  
REAL WORLD

★★★★★★

## SUGE KNIGHT

THE ENDLESS FALL

★★★★★★

## MUMFORD & SONS

★★★★★★

## BERNIE SANDERS

★★★★★

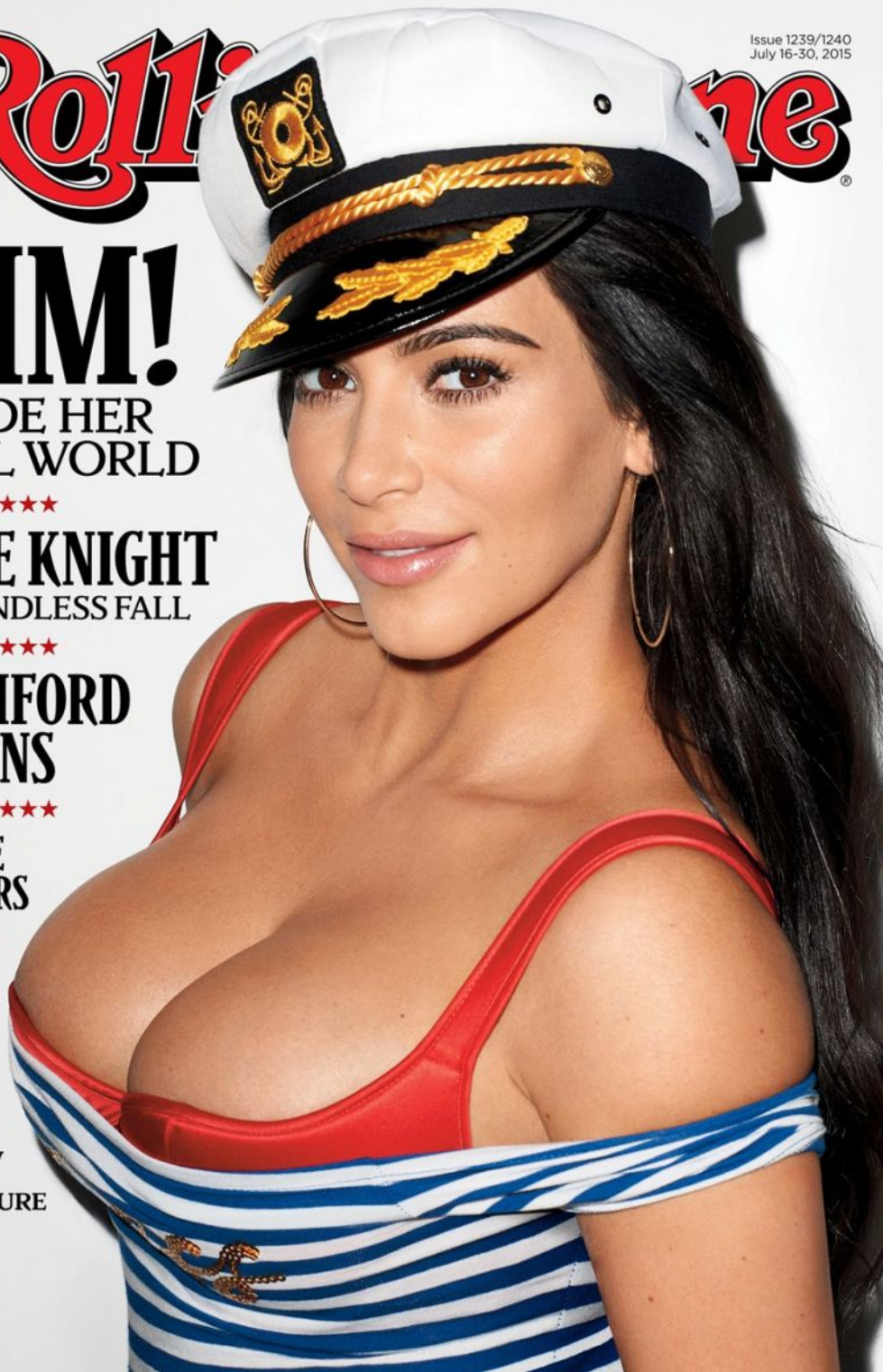
TAME  
IMPALA

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DON  
HENLEY

JUDD  
APATOW

DISCLOSURE



# Up In the Air

Last year, a young man

walked into the Seattle

airport and took the

next flight to anywhere

—and he hasn't come

down since

*By Ben Wofford*

SOMEWHERE OUT ON THE tarmac at Chicago O'Hare, Ben Schlappig has taken over the cabin. He's just boarded Cathay Pacific Flight 807 bound for Hong Kong, and is passing out a couple hundred dollars' worth of designer chocolates to a small swarm of giggling flight attendants. At a glance, the first-class cabin looks empty, leatherbound playpens of faux mahogany and fresh-cut flowers that comprise the inner sanctum of commercial flight that few ever witness. Just then, two men in their twenties hidden in the far corner

*Photographs by  
Bryan Derballa*

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**Terminal  
Life**

*Ben Schlappig  
in TK airport.  
He says this  
year he has  
flown more  
than 400,000  
miles.*

catch a glimpse of Schlappig. At once, they stand to greet him. “This is so cool!” exclaims one, and soon Schlappig is ordering champagne for everyone.

This sort of thing happens to Schlappig nearly everywhere he goes. Today, his fans will witness Schlappig’s latest mission: a weekend trip that will slingshoot him across the major cities of East Asia – Hong Kong, Jakarta, Tokyo – and back to New York, in 69 hours. He’ll virtually never leave the airport, and when he does he’ll rest his head only in luxury hotels. With wide ears, Buddy Holly glasses and a shock of strawberry-blond hair, Schlappig resembles Ralphie from *A Christmas Story* if he grew up to become an Abercrombie & Fitch model. Back beyond the curtain in business class, a dozen jowly faces cast a stony gaze on the crescendos of laughter and spilt champagne – another spoiled trust-fund kid, they’ve judged, living off his parents’ largesse. But Schlappig has a job. This is his job.

Schlappig is one of the biggest stars among an elite group of obsessive fliers whose mission is to outwit the airlines, self-styled competitors with a singular objective: fly for free, as much as they can, without getting caught. In the past 20 years, the Internet has drawn together this strange band of savants with an odd mix of skills: the digital talent of a code writer, a lawyer’s love affair with fine print, and a passion for airline bureaucracy. It’s a whirling hive mind of IT whizzes, stats majors, aviation nerds and everyone else you knew who once skipped the prom.

Schlappig owes his small slice of fame to his blog “One Mile at a Time,” a diary of a young man living the life of the world’s most implausible airline ad. Posting as often as six times a day, he metes out meticulous counsel on the art of travel hacking – what they call the Hobby. It’s not just the how-to tips that draw his fans, it’s the vicarious thrill of Schlappig’s nonstop-luxury life – a recent flight with a personal shower and butler service, or the time Schlappig was chauffeured across a tarmac in a Porsche. He understands that his fans aren’t just travel readers – they’re gamers, and Schlappig is teaching them how to rewrite the rules.

“I’m very fortunate in that I do what I love,” says Schlappig, stretching out in an ergonomic armchair just after we reach 30,000 feet and just before the mushroom consommé arrives. “It’s the ultimate first-world problem.” In the past year, since ditching the Seattle apartment he shared with his ex-boyfriend, he’s

## His mission is to outwit the airlines and fly first class, for free, as much as he can, without getting caught.

flown more than 400,000 miles, enough to circumnavigate the globe 16 times. It’s been 43 exhausting weeks since he slept in a bed that wasn’t in a hotel, and he spends an average of six hours daily in the sky. He has a freewheeling itinerary, often planning his next destination upon hitting the airport. Just last week, he rocketed through Dallas, Dubai, Muscat, Barcelona and Frankfurt. Yet for all his travel, it would be a mistake to call Schlappig a nomad. The moment that he’s whiffed the airless ambience of a pressurized cabin, he’s home.

“An airplane is my bedroom,” he says, stretching to reach his complimentary slippers. “It’s my office, and it’s my playroom.” The privilege of reclining in the personal suite he now occupies costs around \$15,000. But Schlappig typically makes this trip when

*This is BEN WOFFORD’s first piece for ROLLING STONE. He lives in Washington, D.C. He traveled to TK countries for this story.*

he’s bored on the weekend. When he does, he pays for it like he pays for everything: with a sliver of his gargantuan cache of frequent-flier miles that grows only bigger by the day. Hong Kong, he says, is his favorite hub, and “the only city I could ever live in.” The 16-hour trip has become so routine, he says, that it’s begun to feel like a pajama-clad blur of champagne and caviar – or, in Schlappig’s terminology, a “two-hangover flight.”

As the sun descends over the polar circle, a recumbent Schlappig loses himself in a *Two Broke Girls* marathon playing on a freestanding flatscreen. “The fact is, we are beating the airlines at their own game,” he said last year at a gathering of the Hobby’s top talent. “The people who run these programs are idiots.” Then he paused. “And we’ll always be one step ahead of them.”

**S**CHLAPPIG WASN’T SO MUCH INTRODUCED to his fixation as he was raised by it. Born in New York and raised in Tampa, he became obsessed with airplanes, endlessly reciting aircraft models and issuing flight announcements from the back of his parents’ car. “Benjamin was always different than my two other boys,” says his mom, Barbara. “Teachers told me, ‘He’s ahead of everything.’ He was bored.”

Around age 12, he discovered the website FlyerTalk, a massive free-for-all forum of all things airline, where users meet to strategize over deals, test for cracks in the bureaucracy and share the spoils. There, Schlappig found a global community playing a massively complex game set upon three basic components.

One of the most basic steps a Hobbyist can take is choosing an airline, competing for top-tier loyalty status; it took Schlappig about a year to master the dozens of convoluted techniques, exploiting mistakes in ticketing algorithms and learning the ins and outs of the frequent-flier programs airlines had created after deregulation in the late 1970s. The second leg of the game was credit cards – collecting and canceling as many as possible, and deploying a series of tricks to reap the reward points that bank-and-airline-card partnerships would give away for next to nothing. As he delved deeper, Schlappig learned about a third level, a closely guarded and enigmatic ritual called Manufacture Spend. Airline-affiliated credit cards award points for every dollar spent, so over the decades, Hobbyists developed ways to manipulate this system, spending money on a credit card without ultimately spending anything. At its simplest, this included purchasing dollar coins from the U.S. Mint with a credit card and depositing them directly into their accounts, or simply purchasing goods in bulk that they could turn around and sell. Schlappig read one detailed post after another that insisted Manufacture Spend was the only true way to fly for free – like paying a bank teller and

yanking the money back with clear string.

Eventually, the best way he learned to visualize this bureaucratic gamesmanship was to see it as a series of table games, each situated across a sprawling casino floor – and the airlines were the house, the Hobbyists were the card-counters.

Exceptionally bright and equally motivated, Schlappig saw a window to convincing his parents – by showing them how they could visit family in Germany paying less in first class than flying economy. From there, his parents grew to fully indulge his obsession. By the time he was 15, they were delivering him to the airport on Saturdays and retrieving him Sunday nights at baggage claim. “It was an interesting hobby,” says his dad, Arno, as cicadas chirp outside the St. Petersburg condo their son bought them after the blog took off. “I said, ‘Hey! Keep it up. It’s better than smoking pot.’” On a typical weekend, Schlappig would hopscotch to the West Coast and back – Tampa, Chicago, San Fran-

cisco, L.A., never leaving the airport. “Some of his friends knew,” Arno says. “The teachers I don’t think were aware of it.”

Despite his high IQ, Schlappig was a disinterested student. He attended an all-boys Catholic school, where he struggled to fit in. “When his homework was done, he went back to his room on FlyerTalk,” Arno recalls. “And he just posted and posted.” Hobbyists say the game takes years to master. But at 16, Schlappig became the first user to fly across the Pacific Ocean six times without stopping – Chicago, Osaka, San Francisco, Seoul and back again – in July 2006. By his 17th birthday, he’d logged half a million miles. That year, Schlappig was elected to FlyerTalk’s governing TalkBoard; in 2009, he ascended to vice president, second to Gary

told Barbara to keep Ben home. On the worst days, Barbara did the only thing that seemed to calm her son. They drove to the airport and sat together in silence, watching the airplanes take off and land. “His eyes were all sparkled,” she says, remembering their day-long outings.

Eventually, the family relocated to Tampa, where Ben attended grade school and took his obsession to the next level. “You know, in retrospect, they were crazy for letting me fly,” Ben says. Marc, his now-deceased brother, was 14 going on 30 – overstressed and Ivy League-bound, intensely focused on planning for law school while studying French and Latin on top of his native German and English. Then, one day, he was gone. “By the time it came around to me,” Ben continues, “the approach my mom had was, ‘Life is too short not to take up what you love.’”

Throughout high school, his jet-setting picked up pace, as he crisscrossed the country on his beloved United Airlines. For the first time, he had found a place to belong. Schlappig earned elite status in the ninth grade, proudly brandishing his “Premier 1K” card wherever he went. He found he connected socially with Hobbyists far better than with classmates. He started organizing meet-ups around the country and advertising them on FlyerTalk – with Hobbyists flying in free, of course.

In the fall of 2007, Schlappig enrolled at the only college he applied to, the University of Florida, without ever visiting. He was bored almost instantly, filling the emptiness with travel and FlyerTalk. The following February, Schlappig launched “One Mile at a Time” as a freshman, and he began speaking at airline-sponsored events, wonky consortiums where airline employees and frequent fliers could mingle. It was at one such gath-

ering at San Francisco International in 2009 that the 19-year-old Schlappig met Alex Pourazari, another teenager who’d become a member of Schlappig’s rapidly growing following. “I was such a fanboy – so embarrassing,” recalls Pourazari. “I still have that adoring e-mail that I sent him. It cracks me up. I go look at it sometimes, just to remind myself how far we’ve come.” The two quickly became best friends, together plotting ever-more-dizzying flight routes to challenge each other’s game.

“We were like brothers,” says Pourazari, who now lives in Seattle. “It was more like we were best friends than anything. Then we both realized that we were gay. And we grew up together.”

They logged hundreds of hours in the air together, rarely leaving airports. This practice – called mileage running, or flying incessantly to accrue frequent-flier miles – is a foundation of the Hobby, what dribbling is to basketball. Schlappig and Pourazari took their first mileage run on Valentine’s Day 2010. On one run, they hit seven airports from Tampa en route to Hawaii, turning straight back without even breathing the air in the parking lots.

For the next year and a half, they continued to perfect their techniques; one favorite was called flight bumping. At the time, airlines often oversold their flights, giving volunteers a free ride on the next one, plus a \$400 voucher. Oversold flights are supposedly chance occurrences, but using software popularized in the Hobby for collating obscure Federal Aviation Administration data – programs with inscrutable names like ITA Matrix and KSV – Schlappig and Pourazari became masters of predict-



## The High Life

*“An airplane is my bedroom,” says Schlappig, who has circumnavigated the globe 16 times this year. “It’s my office, and it’s my playroom. I’m very fortunate to do what I love.”*

Leff, 34, still one of the Hobby’s most popular bloggers. (Schlappig calls Leff “the Godfather” of the Hobby; the pair e-mail daily.)

“I was scared at the beginning,” Barbara says with a chuckle. “I mean, what mom lets her son fly at such a young age around the country, right?” U.S. air marshals wondered the same thing when they once hauled Schlappig off a plane after glimpsing his baffling itinerary, demanding to speak to his parents. But the Schlappigs held firm. “I think the reason why they let him fly around as a kid, and why they let him follow his passion,” says one friend close to the Schlappig family, “was because they already had one kid who basically left too early.”

**B**EN WAS THREE WHEN HIS OLDEST brother, Marc, just days after his 14th birthday, was struck and killed by a drunk piloting a boat. Schlappig’s parents had just bought Marc a Jet Ski for a gift.

Schlappig’s father, who worked for a bank, was around only on weekends. “Marc was like a father to him,” Barbara says. “He was everything.”

For the next year, Ben refused to go to preschool, and when he did the teachers couldn’t stop his screaming. Eventually they

ing when flights would bump. It was free money. The two would stand side by side in front of a terminal's sprawling monitors, arguing over the best contenders like they were picking greyhounds at the track.

Soon, Schlappig began studying the rules of so-called apology vouchers. As a conciliatory gesture for anything broken on a given flight, United offered coupons to passengers worth \$200 or \$400. Every time he boarded a plane, Schlappig looked for something broken – a headset or an overhead light – and racked up the coupons. “When a system can easily be exploited, it’s tempting to push it to its limits, for the game of it alone,” Schlappig says. “Especially combined with the arrogant confidence only a teenager can have.” During his senior year, he carelessly bragged to a *New York Times* travel reporter that he had amassed more than \$10,000 in bumping vouchers. A few weeks later, just before his last final exam in college in April 2011, Schlappig says, he received a certified letter from United, cheerily informing him that because he had taken advantage of the system his frequent-flier account was permanently suspended. He was banned from flying, he recalls the letter saying, unless he paid the company \$4,755 – the amount it claimed as losses through Schlappig’s techniques.

“I mean, how do you define ‘taking advantage of?’” Schlappig asks, passing a hand towel back to a doting stewardess as we fly over the South China Sea. “Was I seriously inconvenienced to the tune of \$200 every time my audio wasn’t working? No. But

“Being in your twenties is hard. Being gay in your twenties is harder. This is Ben’s way of escaping it.”

they create the system.” (United officials will not comment on Schlappig’s case, other than to say, “We don’t take steps toward limiting member engagement with the program unless we see acts of fraud or other serious violations.”) Schlappig has repeatedly offered to send United a check but has gotten no response. “While it doesn’t justify anything, I think it became more about the game in those years,” he says. “And while I was far from the only one playing, I thought I was the best.”

Just weeks after receiving his banishment letter from United, Schlappig graduated with a degree in marketing. He stayed in Tampa, still dating Pourazari by airplane, and after going on a few corporate interviews, he decided to take a chance and turn the Hobby into a career. That summer, he incorporated PointsPros, a consultancy that helps customers build itineraries out of frequent-flier miles, and brought Pourazari on board.

“We were just plane geeks, plain and simple,” Pourazari says. He stops midsentence on the phone to call out the models of planes as they pass over his balcony. “We had a joke: I’m not heterosexual, I’m not homosexual. I’m asexual.”

With their inscrutably complex rules, the airlines had created a small market of hopelessly confused vacationers, and PointsPros immediately found itself in demand. After a year of dealing with a staggering workload and a long-distance relationship, Schlappig decided to move in with Pourazari in Seattle. During the move, in the fall of 2012, Schlappig spotted fellow Hobbyist Tiffany Funk, and he virtually recruited her on the spot. She arrived to find the pair on the brink of a stress-induced implosion. “Things grew really fast,” recalls Funk, 33, who lives with her husband in San Diego. “And Ben was totally not prepared.”

After a year, though, Schlappig’s relationship with Pourazari began to unwind, and Schlappig found little holding him to the

ground. “At that point, I was like, ‘Screw it,’” he remembers. “I decided I might as well do this full-time.” In April 2014, at the end of his lease, he walked into Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. He hasn’t come down since.

**I**N 1979, AS DEREGULATION TRANSFORMED the airline business from a monitored public good into corporate America’s new Wild West, an ad executive named Bill Bernbach hatched a marketing scheme that would change air travel forever, by incentivizing sporadic one-time customers to become returning fliers. Bernbach proposed to his client American Airlines that it reward customers with free travel. Two years later, the first frequent-flier program was born, and the rest of the industry scrambled to join the arms race.

The Hobby followed soon after, pioneered by a triumphant menswear clothing manager and moonlighting aviation nut named Randy Petersen of Sioux City, Iowa. In 1986, Petersen founded an aviation magazine called *Inside Flyer* with \$800 and no publishing experience. “I’m not a business guy, I’m a surfer-dude guy,” Petersen says. “I kind of figured out how to earn free travel when these programs were just starting out.” In a bright-yellow trucker hat over wild bleach-white hair, the 61-year-old looks like a cross between Jesse Ventura and Doc Watson from *Back to the Future*. Early editions of Petersen’s magazine featured stories on deals from obscure carriers; instructed fliers on how to duck airline countermeasures; and showed readers how they could win a thousand free miles by subscribing to magazines like *Esquire*. By 1993, *Inside Flyer* had 90,000 readers. Three years later, Petersen took the magazine online as *FlyerTalk*.

Almost at once, *FlyerTalk* became the singular worldwide hub of airline nerds, and today it claims to have more than 500,000 members. Virtually nothing on *FlyerTalk* is meant to be understood by outsiders. Posts there are littered with jargon like “3xx” (Airbus), “open jaw” (three-segment round trip) and “FEBO” (in-flight meal delivery). So Petersen’s next move was to launch BoardingArea, a content platform for public consumption that featured *FlyerTalk*’s biggest stars on their own blogs.

This was where Schlappig launched “One Mile at a Time.” Immediately he became one of the Hobby’s biggest stars and, according to his friends, a millionaire. His revenue comes from three sources: impression-based ads on the blog; the PointsPros consultancy; and “affiliate marketing,” which means collecting a commission from credit-card companies each time a card sign-up originates from his blog. Schlappig admits that affiliate marketing gives him a vested interest in the very companies that most Hobbyists game. A typical garden-variety Hobbyist owns at least a dozen credit cards; many have more than 40.

Amassing a large cache of credit cards is essential to the Manufacture Spend. No topic of discussion produces more worried glances or tighter lips – a code of silence is central to Hobby culture. Manufacture Spend reveals a fundamental but overlooked truth about frequent-flier miles: They’ve become, in essence, a currency. In 2012, the European Central Bank categorized airline miles in the same category as bitcoin, and determined that their aggregate value exceeds all of the minted money in circulation on the planet. But if miles are currency, then airlines are like privatized central bankers who can constantly change the rules, devalue the points and close frequent-flier accounts at will. In 2013, one Hobbyist sued Northwest Airlines for closing his account, insisting that he never broke the program rules. The case rose to the Supreme Court, which sided with Northwest,

reasoning that because airlines, not customers, owned the frequent-flier miles, an airline's latitude for shuttering an account is wide – the same legal basis that casinos enjoy for kicking out card-counters.

Schlappig is giving me this economics lesson while he waits in the spa of the first-class Virgin Atlantic Clubhouse in JFK Airport in New York. We've just arrived here from Tokyo, three days after we started in O'Hare. Schlappig has been up all night, downing eight cups of coffee and typing blog posts the entire flight; he maintains a militant work regimen, blogging only on Eastern Standard time, jet lag be damned. "I think he's not a person who was meant to work from 9 to 5," says his mother. "Now he probably works 18 hours a day." Schlappig is chatting through a complimentary massage, enjoying the elbow in his back from a plump spa therapist and straining occasionally to sip his dry gin with crème de mûre. She chats him back, smiling, and asks how he's been – Schlappig knows almost the entire staff here by name, and schedules his globe-trots to make a pit stop every few weeks.

He's treated equally well by flight attendants, who are among his rowdiest fans and are keen to mark the occasion when they spot Schlappig on their flights. When a chief steward recognized him on one superluxury carrier, Schlappig stepped into his on-board shower to find a bottle of Dom Pérignon on ice waiting for him. On a recent international flight, an attendant maneuvered an unwitting Schlappig into an empty row, administering what he delicately terms a surprising and unwanted hand job. ("It was a disaster," he says. "I tried to get out, but there was no point.")

Despite his success, many in the Hobby think the days of hop-scotching across the globe are numbered. Paranoia is the lingua franca of all Hobbyists, and now is a good time to be pessimistic. Earlier this year, Delta and United both switched to revenue-based reward systems: Frequent-flier miles are now awarded by total dollars spent, effectively ending the practice of mileage running. Schlappig seems nonplussed. "I've been at this for 10 years," he says. "And there's not a single year where I didn't hear at one point or another, 'This is coming to an end.' But every year, we find new opportunities. We're one step ahead of them."

For some, the game has evolved from a wonkish pastime into an ends-justified obsession with beating the airlines – less *Rain Man*, more *Ocean's Eleven*. While the game's traditional methods remain technically legal, these Hobbyists – we'll call them the Dark Hobby – use tactics that routinely violate airline terms and conditions, techniques that can span a gradient from clever and harmless to borderline theft. (Schlappig insists that he doesn't participate in the Dark Hobby or any other illegal activity.) Take the practice of "hidden-city ticketing" – booking your layover as your final destination, like buying a ticket from Point A to Point C, then sneaking away at B – or "fuel dumping," a booking technique that confuses the price algorithm to deduct the cost of fuel from a ticket, often at an enormous discount. In this strange and risky world, black markets exist where brokers buy and sell miles, and Dark Hobbyists pay others to fly in their name.

They also write custom code to hunt the Web for "mistake fares" posted accidentally by airlines and hotels. "My friend can write one of these scripts in two hours," a Dark Hobbyist tells me. "These are huge companies, and they don't write a simple code to double-check their prices. It blows me away." He recently used a custom script to book a Westin presidential suite for \$10.

"These people have the ability to cause serious financial harm," says Henry Harteveltdt, an industry analyst and former airline loyalty-program manager. Harteveltdt has spent decades studying the Hobby and the airlines – a war of attrition, he says, between two equally obsessive tribes with very long memories. "No one's hands are clean in this fight," he adds. "The gamers have dirt on their hands, and airlines have dirt on their hands." For now, the Hobby's principal advantage remains in its size – tiny enough, he says, to avoid the attention of the airlines' gargantuan bureaucracy. But for Hobbyists tempted by dreams of mastering the game and beating the house, Harteveltdt offers a warning. "Ultimately," he says, "the house always wins."

FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS, THE COMMERCIAL airline industry has been mulling how to solve a problem like the Hobby. "The airlines basically thought they could manage it down," Harteveltdt says. "Today, they'll never be able to shut it down entirely." For years, a de facto standoff ensued, with each side equally invested in keeping the travel-going public none the wiser.

This past winter, however, the airlines seemed to have unveiled a new strategy. Following the example of the music industry in the early 2000s, they have taken to suing small fry in the interest of making an example. In November, United joined the travel site Orbitz in a lawsuit against a 22-year-old computer-science major named Aktar Zaman, creator of the website Skiplagged, a Hobbyist version of Expedia that's brought the technique of hidden-city ticketing into mass consumption. In April, an Illinois judge threw out the claim; United has vowed

to appeal.

"They're using the public's lack of knowledge in order to profit greatly," says Zaman, a stick-thin kid who looks barely old enough for prom, stuttering in a nervous mumble. "I'm helping increase the efficiency of the market. This is good for society." Zaman reads Schlappig's blog, and in January he appeared with him on HuffPost Live, where they defended the practice.

Last December, Schlappig joined a slate of popular BoardingArea bloggers at the Frequent Traveler University, a weekend boot camp hosted at a Hyatt in Arlington, Virginia. Roughly 200 people assembled for the advanced seminar's three days of Powerpoints from the Hobby's top talent; most of those in attendance are white and in middle-management or IT.

Inside a jam-packed seminar room, Schlappig delivers an emphatic lecture on complex flight segments. He's followed by his fellow bloggers – speaking at a white-hot clip in the alien dialect of airline legal departments. A chiseled twentysomething named Scott Mackenzie makes his case for why airline [Cont. on 70]



### On the Wing

*Schlappig enjoying the benefits of his first-class life (above). He's been obsessed with planes since he was a boy (with TK, right). "I'm very fortunate in that I do what I love," he says today. TKTKTKTKT*



## UP IN THE AIR

[Cont. from 57] website search results are incomplete and misleading. Hans, a baby-faced linebacker from Minnesota, explains the finer points of gaming customer-service agents to accrue credit-card points. A Russian-born math-professor-turned-financier teaches Manufactured Spend. A disheveled-chic consultant named Matthew Klint, a former White House staffer, leads a seminar simply titled “Hacking United.” “This is their Gameboy,” says Petersen, the Hobby’s founder, of the younger recruits enchanted by Schlappig’s success.

Dark Hobbyists are said to network at these events. If you have the skills, you may find an invitation to join one of the dozen bands that operate anonymously around the world. These groups use secure servers and private e-mail groups to communicate. “There’s one that I’m on,” says Gary Leff, referring to an online group, stressing that he joined only to monitor the chatter. “Others I’ve had access to don’t know.” Schlappig for a time practiced Manufacture Spend, but, perhaps still haunted by United, he’s decided that anything riskier lies beyond the pale. “Some of it’s the shadiest stuff I’ve ever seen,” he tells me. “That’s why I don’t do a lot of this crap anymore.”

In multiple interviews, airline representatives insist that Schlappig and *Flyer-Talk* represent little more than a portal for passionate customers. But broach the topic of Dark Hobbyists, and they turn grave. “If any members of these groups can be particularly effective, they can have a catastrophic effect on an airline,” says Jonathan Clarkson of Southwest.

The Skiplagged lawsuit resonated with a thunderclap in the Hobby wars – and ever since, a new perception has grown that it might be airlines, and not Hobbyists, that are in over their heads. If true, it’s a development that wouldn’t lack for poetic justice, says Tim Wu, a professor at Columbia Law School and frequent writer on airline policy. Before deregulation, the price for a given seat remained fixed. But today, says Wu, the wide range of prices that customers might get charged for the very same seat is spectacularly wide. “They made a normal activity suddenly like going to a casino,” he says. “A lot of people get shafted. But it also creates an opportunity for people who can break the system and live like Schlappig. They’re chasing around these people who are trying to game a system that they themselves set up.”

**A** FEW WEEKS LATER, AFTER MIDNIGHT in downtown Hong Kong, and after crossing the Pacific on another 16-hour flight, Schlappig looks like he was just let out of school for the day. Raccoon-eyed and hair mussed, riding a buzz equal parts champagne and coffee, he has found himself in his favorite city once again. Tonight, a cab has dumped him

curbside at the five-star Hong Kong Hyatt. “There’s something indescribable in the air here,” he murmurs. “You’ll catch on to it.”

Schlappig has barely stepped off the elevator into the hotel’s glistening VIP lounge when someone shouts, “Is that who I think it is?” Two stout men and a blonde turn around, just in time to see a beaming Schlappig heading toward them, all hugs and first names. In Hobbyworld, where one is liable to see the same face twice, a run-in like this is a solemn occasion for yet another bottle of champagne. “We are a tiny, tiny minority,” Schlappig says.

One hour in, and the three are swapping stories about the time they met the teenage Schlappig at a Hobby party he organized in Sausalito, California. The woman at the table is a corporate lawyer from New York, one of the Hobby’s few females. “I met him, and I was like, ‘Oh, my God,’” she remembers. “This kid is, like, in high school.” Each person at the table has concocted a story for their co-workers or friends about where they disappear to on weekends. But this evening, they’ve found one another in the Hong Kong night. Schlappig spills champagne on himself as he raises his glass for a toast: “So much for lonely, right?”

The next morning, Schlappig is fighting off a hangover as he trudges through Hong Kong International for a flight to Jakarta. He sighs. “I don’t really associate anything with being home,” he says, “but this is about as close as it gets.” Bag in tow, he pauses to gaze at the sprawling indoor pavilion. “The Hong Kong airport – I do feel at home here,” he muses. “It’s weird.” Soon, it will be a year since he gave up his apartment in Seattle. He ponders the thought with a glass of white wine somewhere over the Indian Ocean, but for the first time he betrays a note of sadness in his blank smile. “Absolutely, it’s isolating,” he admits. “There are nights where it’s 3 a.m. in Guangzhou, China, and you’re like, ‘Oh, I could actually be in L.A. having fun with friends.’ And there’s nothing to do here.”

Or anywhere: His trip reports betray a theme, in photo after photo entirely devoid of human companionship: empty lounges, first-class menus, embroidered satin pillows – inanimate totems of a five-star existence. On our next flight, a seven-hour run from Jakarta International to Tokyo, Schlappig tries to get himself motivated about the champagne selection, holding forth on the best meal pairings with a \$200 bottle of Krug. But there are no fans waiting to surprise him here. An elderly Japanese couple sleep in the corner. Otherwise, the cabin is deserted. Air carriers long ago made the judgment to let first-class suites go unfilled, at the risk of tainting the marketable aura of exclusivity.

“I do what I love,” Schlappig whispers, perhaps more to himself, trying not to wake the couple. “You have to understand: This has always been my passion.” His words trail off, and he closes his eyes. “Being in

your twenties is hard – being a gay guy in your twenties is even harder,” says Nick Dierman, a close friend of Schlappig’s and a fellow Hobbyist. “It’s a challenge. I think this is his way of escaping it.”

By the time the plane touches down in Tokyo, Schlappig has been in seven countries in seven days. He scoops his things and drifts wordlessly to the exit. It’s still dark outside at Haneda International Airport, the world’s fourth-largest, but at this hour the palace-size structure is nearly empty. A woman sleeps at a McDonald’s table, head back and mouth open, the faint echoes of a vacuum cleaner whirring in some far-off terminal.

In three hours, he’ll be on a flight bound for the States, and to his dismay he finds the VIP lounge still locked. With a pout, he plops down among the waiting area’s bleak cookie-cutter chairs. Assuming the death of the Hobby doesn’t prove imminent, Schlappig repeatedly insists that his life can go on forever this way. But he also announces, genuinely, that he wants to settle down one day. “That’s exactly what he wants to do,” says Pourazari. “But he can’t. He doesn’t know how.”

Passing the time here in the dark morning, Schlappig reveals the most cherished thrill of his new life in first class. After the champagne bottles are empty, he’ll be struck with the sudden urge to return to New Delhi. There, tucked in a corner of Indira Gandhi International Airport, he’ll find a perch and study the arrivals hall. “You see a whole family, 20 people, picking up someone at the airport,” he says. “People with signs, people with balloons, with flowers. There’s something beautiful about that.” He’ll watch for a few hours, pondering the stories behind the reunions and the cries of laughter that come with each new flight. But he still can’t decide if what he’s just seen is a vision of his past or the future.

“The world is so big, I can keep running,” Schlappig says. “At the same time, it makes you realize the world is so small.” After a long pause, he continues, “I want what I can’t have. There’s nothing gratifying about that. It’s crazy and it’s fucked up. I’d still like to think I’m a reasonably happy person.” He grins. “Despite all that.”

Soon, a message comes over the PA system in muffled Japanese. He leaps to his feet, still the 10th-grader at the bell, transfixed once more by the prospect of escaping for the weekend and exploring the world. Schlappig angles through the hangar, the low purr of his rolling carry-on resounding across the cages of an empty bazaar. He’s picking up the pace now, bounding down the empty hallway, ready to take off. At sunrise, the shops will reopen, the terminal will roar back to life. But by then, he will already be gone.

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