

## Summarize:

- a) why people drink alcohol early in the morning at airports
- b) the downsides of doing so

You know the feeling. You've got up at 4am, been driven to the airport in a taxi that stinks of pine-essence air-freshener, and fought your way through check-in and security. Then, as you raise a cup of coffee to your lips with quivering hands, you find you're sitting next to half-a-dozen men smoking furiously and downing pints of lager.

You don't get them at railway stations, you don't get them at coach stations, and you can't get them at motorway service stations because there's no alcohol served. So what is it about the tang of aviation fuel in the morning that stimulates these travellers' booze juices? Why is it that those of us who can't even stomach a piece of toast before 7am have to endure a dawn chorus that is not the charming trill of birdsong, but the sound of grown men shouting "Cheers", or worse?

Is the key to such behaviour the link between stress and its apparent alleviator, alcohol? Do these dawn tipplers find flying - indeed, holidays themselves - so stressful that a pint and a cigarette at some ungodly hour is the only way they can cope? After all, many of us turn to the bottle after a difficult day at work. Why shouldn't we do the same after a nightmarish journey to the airport? Or a hectic couple of weeks trying to clear our desks so that we can take a fortnight's holiday?

"That's a question that used to puzzle me when I started this job," says Barry Brewster, who is in charge of JD Wetherspoon bars at 13 different UK airports. "I couldn't understand how people could be drinking brandy or lager at five in the morning. Then I realised that it was really a way of saying, 'I've got here, I've checked in, I've got the tickets, I've got the passport, I've done everything I'm supposed to do - the holiday starts now!'" And if "now" happens to be 6am, so be it.

Psychologist Corrine Usher agrees. "That early-morning airport drink marks the frontier point when people pass from being at work to being on holiday," she says. "It's the moment they say 'Right, I'm always working hard for other people, now it's time to let others work for me.'"

Another reason for turning to alcohol so early in the morning, say the experts, is fear. Some passengers are simply trying to numb themselves to the terrors of take-off. "I think more people are afraid of flying than will actually admit to it," says psychologist Dorothy Rowe, author of many self-help books. "And having a drink with a crowd of other people is a perfect way of hiding it."

Occasionally, dawn drinkers have something else to hide. Robert Powell, the shift manager at Gatwick's JD Wetherspoon, says, "I remember a young Turkish man who ordered a pint, drank it and refused to pay. It turned out he wanted to avoid military service back home, and he thought the best way would be to get arrested over here. I said he could have the drink on the house, provided he found a way round the

problem other than getting thrown into jail. He didn't catch the plane though I don't know how it turned out."

So, a way of dealing with stress or marking the beginning of a holiday; fear; or a reluctance to do military service? Clearly it was time to ask the drinkers themselves why they do it. So at 6.30am last week I paid a visit to JD Wetherspoon's Red Lion inside Gatwick's busy North Terminal. Outside, rain was sheeting down on the runway, but, inside, Lloyd Palmer's stag weekend was already well under way. He and seven friends were off to Ibiza for four days to celebrate his forthcoming marriage to Gail. "Well, actually, the wedding's been postponed, but it's only a temporary blip and, besides, the holiday was booked months ago. We couldn't not go, could we?" pleaded Palmer, to a chorus of "course not" from his mates - all the while dispatching generous draughts of Stella Artois down the hatch.

"Ah, come on," implored Palmer's friend John Williams, in response to the yuk-how-can-you-drink-at-this-hour expression on my face. "We're only away for a few days and we've been looking forward to this for weeks. I mean, it's not as if we start drinking at seven every morning, is it?" Indeed it is not, as the statistics prove. Whereas the Red Lion does half of its business before noon, the average UK pub would be lucky to do as much as five per cent.

Across the room, two more drinkers echoed the this-is-a-one-off line. "No way would we even dream of drinking before breakfast normally," said Su and Nicky, two friends who were knocking back a quick couple of lagers before flying to Orlando "It's just we've had such a hassle getting here. Last night I had to rush my cat to the vet's with a serious kidney complaint, and to tell the truth, I was on the point of cancelling the whole holiday."

Other customers, it turned out, were so jetlagged, their body clocks didn't even realise it was dawn. Three stools down, a Scotsman who asked not to be identified, was en route from Bangkok to Inverness. "I've got no idea what the time is, I just know I've been travelling for about a day and it feels like time for a drink," he said. "I own a couple of bars in Phuket, and travel out there six times a year, so this is a pretty familiar route for me."

Homeward-bound traveller John Wilmotts, meanwhile, who sat in front of three Budweiser bottles, was simply drinking to pass the time. "I got here at midnight for a flight to Cincinnati at 9am," he said. "I thought going through security would take longer than it did."

Last week's customers were well-behaved, though the pub's manager, Dave Pearce, admitted that drinking early in the day - as at any other - can lead to trouble.

"The classic situation is where you get a group of lads on a stag weekend hooking up with a group of girls on a hen weekend, especially when they discover they're both flying to the same destination. They all start trying to swap boarding cards so they can sit next to the ones they like the look of. In those sorts of situations, I might have to intervene if the language gets a bit strong, and ask them all to remember where they are. We may be a licensed premises, but we're a family venue, too."

"On the whole, people aren't here long enough to get really out of hand. When I first started working at Gatwick, seven years ago, the average dwell time [airport-speak for the period between getting through security and boarding the plane] was around 90 minutes; today, it's down to 45 minutes. Mind you, though, plenty of our customers do get stressed by the whole airport experience. It can take them in different ways - some get dithery and indecisive, others get loud and aggressive. I tell our staff not to be surprised by either."

The bad news for morning drinkers, however, is that it is really not a very good idea to mix alcohol with flying off on holiday. As Dr Richard Dawood points out, "If you mix alcohol with stress - such as that caused by long queues or flight delays - you're liable to fly off the handle as opposed to off the runway. Just because you're not flying the plane, doesn't mean you don't have to be alert when you reach your destination. You will certainly need to have all your faculties about you if you're going to be driving on the wrong side of the road in a strange country after a long plane journey."

Added to which, if you have a couple of drinks before flying, even if you have nothing more to drink on board, you may be still over the limit to drive when you land at your destination. Bear in mind that some countries do not permit any alcohol to be consumed at all before driving, while others - such as Sweden - have a limit that is much lower than the UK's.

Or you could, with one over the eight inside you, land yourself in hot water. Last summer, a teacher, who was taking a group of teenagers on a trip abroad, drank too much at Gatwick airport, threw food about inflight, bared his bottom and then tried to kiss a colleague - who reported him.

And if you get really carried away in the bar, an airline may refuse to carry you until you sober up.

"If people absolutely have to have a drink this early in the morning," says Dr Dawood, "I recommend that they drink at least twice as much water as alcohol, to avoid dehydration. A good idea is to take a big bottle of water on the plane; on a jumbo, it can take the stewardesses hours to get the refreshments trolley down the aisle to you."

There is one group of passengers, however, you will never meet in the airport bar at dawn - no matter that they have more cause to feel stressed than most: the England football team. "We often see them milling around in the terminal at Gatwick," says Dave Pearce, "but they never come in the pub. I don't suppose Sven wants them drinking."