



Business Traveler

David Grossman

This is the captain speaking ... any questions?

Have you ever wondered: "What are those little things that stick up on the ends of the wings on many aircraft?" "Winglets," on many newer Boeing jets — or "sails" on an Airbus — reduce drag and help conserve fuel, according to United Airlines' Captain Meryl Getline. (By the way, they're not so little. The winglets on a Boeing 747-400 are six feet high. They just look little because the wing is so enormous.)

"Cap'n Meryl" (her online moniker) enjoys answering fliers questions so much that she created her own Web site, [From The Cockpit](#). She publishes some of the answers in her free online newsletter, which is updated at least once a month. (**Related column:** [On the job, in the air](#))

Some questions she receives have little to do with flying and more to do with the novelty she brings to the job. Women pilots are still not that common, although more are employed than people probably realize. Cap'n Meryl has been flying commercially since 1973 and has been with United since 1985.

The winglets/sails question is one of the 10 most frequently asked questions she receives about flying. Here are the other nine:

2. Is turbulence dangerous?

"Most turbulence is annoying and may be sickening, but it's rarely dangerous," she says. Modern airplanes are made to withstand a tremendous amount of turbulence; injuries occur when passengers don't wear their seat belts or when flight attendants are working in the cabin. Clear air turbulence is the hardest to predict. Unstable weather, rising heat or even passing through another airplane's wake also contributes to sudden plane movement.

3. Why are nautical miles used in aviation rather than statute miles?

Statute miles date back to the Roman Empire; 1,000 (left-right) paces by a Roman soldier equal one statute mile. But around the globe, pilots use nautical charts — similar to those originally designed for ships — based on longitude and latitude. The world is divided into 360 degrees, with 60 minutes to each degree. Each minute equals a nautical mile.

4. Do airlines use navigators today?

No. Navigators, who sat in the cockpit and calculated an aircraft's position and routing, were for the most part obsolete when Cap'n Meryl first took the controls in 1973. "Modern aircraft are equipped with everything we pilots need to navigate ourselves," she says.

5. Can airplanes take off and land on autopilot?

The autopilot can fly an airplane once in the air, and land it, but it cannot be used during takeoff. "Most pilots will hand fly the plane up to 10,000 feet or at cruise altitude before they engage the autopilot," says Cap'n Meryl. The autopilot makes constant corrections for altitude and course. "This frees us up to look out for traffic and other duties," she adds. The autopilot is mandatory for landings during foggy conditions or in a snowstorm when visibility is low. Restrictions prohibit landing using autopilot during very windy conditions.

6. Is fuel conservation an issue for pilots?

"We're extremely fuel conscious these days," Cap'n Meryl says. Pilots can do numerous things to conserve fuel, such as adjusting speed; asking for the best altitude for their current weight, wind and weather conditions; or taxiing on one engine. "We request routes that will minimize fuel consumption," she explains. With a tailwind, fuel can be economized with a straight-line route. In strong headwinds, pilots can save fuel by taking a longer route and flying at an angle to the wind.

7. How do pilots navigate on the ground at airports?

"We have charts that show the names of all the runways, taxiways, terminals, etc. The physical runways, taxiways, terminals, etc., have markings on them. It's pretty much like reading a street map," she explains. Sample charts can be found on the [FAA's Web site](#). Click [here](#) to see a chart for Chicago's O'Hare Airport (*requires Adobe Acrobat*).

8. Do pilots fly more than one airplane?

"Our pilots train for one airplane at a time and then fly only that airplane," Cap'n Meryl says. She currently flies the Airbus 319/320 for United, and she also has flown the Boeing 727, 737, DC-10 and the F-28 for Persian Air Service in Iran; numerous other smaller airplanes; and even helicopters.

9. Which airports present the greatest challenge for takeoffs and landings and why?

This will vary from pilot to pilot, depending on their personal experiences, but Cap'n Meryl's personal choice is Mexico City. "It's at a relatively high altitude, over 7,000 feet, which reduces airplane performance in thin air," she explains. It's often smoggy, making the visibility lousy, she adds. Unlike most U.S. airports, the runways in Mexico City are not grooved, which does not allow rainwater to drain very well. "Even the smallest amount of rain makes the runways slippery. Also, the surrounding mountainous terrain requires a relatively sharp turn on final approach," she says.

10. Do pilots get to choose where they fly?

"Everything we do is based on seniority," Cap'n Meryl explains. Each month, pilots "bid" for the routes they want. Since she lives more than an hour away from her base at Denver International Airport, she prefers to fly long trips so she can make as few trips to the airport as possible. But other pilots might try to fly only on day trips to be home every evening.

She loves being close to water, so she often chooses destinations such as Miami or Fort Lauderdale to spend time at the beach during layovers. Land-locked Mexico City, despite the airport, is also one of her favorites. "Part of the attraction of the life of a pilot is to eat your way around the world," she says. "When I'm in the mood for Mexican food, I know where I'm going!"

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Send David your feedback: David Grossman is a veteran business traveler and former airline industry executive. He writes a column every three weeks on topics of interest and concern to business travelers. E-mail him at travel@usatoday.com.