

Airline coffee: a bitter cup, indeed

How is it possible to screw up a cup of coffee so badly?

By [James Wysong](#)

Travel columnist

Tripso.com

Updated: 8:55 p.m. ET March 28, 2006

Java, Joe, morning juice, black gold, an ex-junkie's last vice — whatever you want to call it, coffee has a firm grip on this country's morning routine. The proof is in the long lines at the airport coffee stands every morning.

Coffee is served on airplanes, too, and it might even be supplied by that familiar purveyor of gourmet coffee from Seattle. Yet, sad to say, when you start to sip this coffee on an airplane, the only special taste you experience is that of a compost heap. How is it possible to screw up a cup of coffee so badly? I have several theories, all grounds for consideration.

1. If the coffee is bad, you won't want a second cup. I'm not saying that all flight attendants are looking to lighten their load, but if the plane is oversold and understaffed, the last thing the flight attendant wants is extra requests for coffee. So, it's possible your crew is not being especially careful about making good coffee and keeping it fresh. In fact, I see this kind of "benign neglect" all the time.

2. If the coffee is bad, folks will buy more at the airport. Here's an interesting coincidence: The coffee you drink on the plane is often supplied by the same company that sells it to you in the airport terminal for \$5 dollars a shot. Call me a conspiracy theorist, but if they sell an inferior blend to the airlines, then travelers might buy a cup in the terminal instead. Seattle gets the money both ways. Sounds like a brilliant business model to me.

3. It's all in the H2O. Many people believe that bad coffee comes from bad water, and they might be right. It is certainly true that airplane water doesn't taste all that great. It is, after all, from the local municipal water supply, and it's been sitting in the plane's water tank for a while. Bottled water makes much better coffee. If you don't believe me, next time you're in a hotel, pour bottled water into your room's coffeemaker. Even those wretched hotel coffee packets can turn out decent coffee if the water is good.

4. You're drinking decaf — whether you want it or not. Many flight attendants brew only decaffeinated coffee. Are they concerned about your jangled nerves? Not particularly. It's just that they'd rather have sleeping passengers than a hyperactive crowd any day. I am not condoning it; I'm just saying it happens. Did you know that airline coffee used to be 90% caffeine-free anyway? And did you know that a few airlines still serve mostly decaffeinated coffee as a matter of course?

5. The water's not hot enough. Some people say that airline coffee is bland because the water doesn't get hot enough to steep the coffee properly. This theory doesn't make much sense to me, as I have been scalded by hot water plenty of times when I've been working in the galley.

Whatever the reason, most airplane coffee is pretty awful. So, what can you do about it? Here are some tips.

1. Skip the cart. Don't drink the coffee from the beverage cart. By the time it gets to you, the coffee is either cold or stale, and it's probably decaffeinated anyway.

2. Make inquiries. Politely ask the flight attendant's opinion of the coffee. If he frowns, take the hint. Sometimes he'll come back with a fresh pot for you later.

3. Take a stand. Get up and take a walk to the back of the airplane after the beverage service, and ask for a cup of coffee. The flight attendants will have time to brew it and you can see that the coffee is fresh.

4. **Tell a fib.** If you need a caffeine dose and you are in doubt as to what is being served, tell the flight attendant that you can't drink decaffeinated coffee, and you will get the right stuff.
5. **Have some taste.** If you don't take your coffee black, you might want to bring a favorite flavored creamer with you. Most of the time, the airlines have only ice-cold 2% milk to offer.
6. **Splurge.** Buy a cup of coffee before you get on the airplane, especially if it's early morning. Your first cup of the day should be the best — and exactly the way you want it.
7. **Spice it up.** Add some Irish Cream to your coffee. I've never had a bad Bailey's Coffee. If you want to skip the booze, there is a non-alcoholic flavored Bailey's creamer.
8. **Drink tea.** There aren't many ways to foul up a cup of tea.

One more tip. When the flight attendant asks you how you take your coffee, skip the jokes. We have heard almost every one of them (and let me tell you, some of them are quite crude).

While I am complaining about coffee matters, whatever happened to the "drip line" at coffee stands? You know: one line for specialty coffees and another (much faster) line for straight java. Believe it or not, there are folks who just want a plain cup of coffee and not some flaming macchiato nonfat cinnamon decaf latte with extra foam. I'm one of those simple people, and I have to wait forever in the long line just to tell the coffee "barista" that I am a drip, and boy, do I feel like one by that time.

I used to be hooked on coffee. It was what I looked forward to most in the morning. I couldn't imagine my life without coffee until I became seriously ill from something I had eaten in South America. The doctor told me that I had to take three months off from alcohol ("Easy," I mused), fatty foods ("Piece of cake"), and caffeine ("Oh no, he couldn't mean ... coffee!") — *especially* coffee.

Well, after three days of "venti" sized headaches, I broke the caffeine addiction and turned into one of those decaf freaks that I used to make fun of. Ah, how the coffee table has turned.

What airline has the best coffee? Which has the worst? Let me know what you think in Tripso's [online coffee poll](#).

James Wysong has worked as a flight attendant with two major international carriers during the past fifteen years. He is the author of the "The Plane Truth: Shift Happens at 35,000 Feet" and "The Air Traveler's Survival Guide." For more information about James or his books, please [visit his Web site](#) or [e-mail him](#). Visit [Tripso's forums](#)!