

# 'Window shopping' from a dizzy height

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I WAS flying to Johannesburg from New York City and had fortuitously been upgraded to business class, *gratis*.

For the following 17 hours my home was to be a luxury mechanically adjustable seat offering an array of non-stop audio-visual entertainment.

One would think, however, that a cross-continental flight would be the perfect opportunity to ponder the scientific brilliance of aerodynamics, or discuss the magnitude and diversity of Earth's topography, or the insignificance of humanity's egoism in the bigger scheme of life.

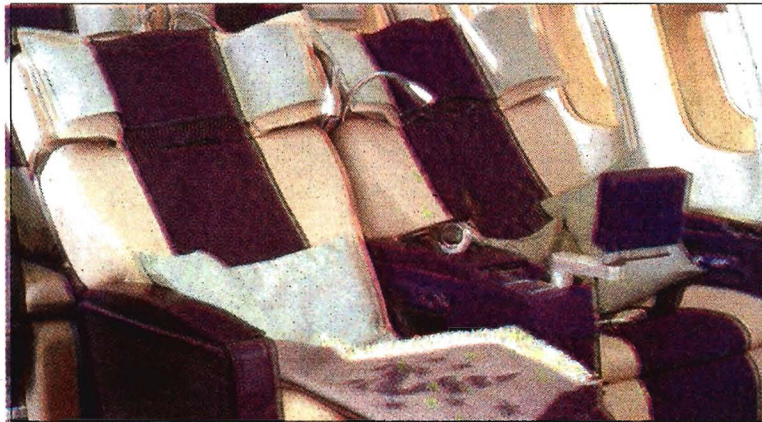
But, when I scanned the cabin, I noticed instead that each and every passenger was either engrossed in American sitcom reruns on their personalised TV screen, or paging through their free copy of SkyMall magazine as intently as if it were *The New Truth*.

I turned my head to look out my window and I marvelled for a minute at the stoical aeroplane wing that contributes to keeping an entire Airbus aloft.

I also made a comment to the person sitting across the aisle from me on how privileged we are to see the Earth from this vantage point.

He nodded once, put on his earphones and switched on his personalised TV screen.

Feeling confined to my own insignificance, I sifted through the magazine pouch in front of me where I found safety instructions (in case of emergency), a duty-free



**CABIN FEVER:** Travelling business class proves you can shop till you drop.

magazine (in case of emergency) and my own free copy of SkyMall. Even at 35 000 feet above sea-level it was impossible to escape consumerism.

On the cover of the magazine was an image of the world's first flying winged robotic insect called the WowWee Dragonfly – a highly evolved children's toy.

I paged through the magazine and found myself immersed in the hi-tech world of all things banal. SkyMall's merchandise manufacturers had successfully vamped up commonplace objects and marketed their ware to what they call "affluent and well-educated travellers who are receptive to innovative, unique products".

This must be true because I am neither affluent, well-educated nor receptive to their products despite the fact that I was reclining in a \$6 000 seat drinking an Australian chardonnay while flying over Algeria.

But yet I was riveted by images and descriptions of their

innovative technology – a lot of which is dedicated to making mundane domestic work even more hands-free, ever more effortless – if only for a laugh.

My favourite gadget was a kitchen appliance called the Towel-Matic that could only be taken seriously if the purchaser has highly infectious leprosy.

It is a sensor-activated device for dispensing paper towels with the wave of your hand. The tag says: "Helps prevent the spread of germs."

But the ultimate kitsch appliance had to be the Deluxe Digital Countdown Toaster for the Uber-lazy or for those suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder.

It rings to let you know when the toast is ready; and there is a bagel function that toasts the cut side of the bagel while only warming the crust. If you happen to be multi-tasking, by brewing coffee at the same time, it is endowed with a cancel button that allows you to pause the process so

that you can keep in time with your culinary commitments.

America is superb at inventing complicated devices solely intended to simplify one's life – and America's gadget generation is even better at buying into it.

The SkyMall catalogue is seen by about 90% of all domestic air passengers in the United States – and reaches more than 650 million air travellers annually. And there is something in it for the whole family.

Women can contentedly toil without the hassle of soil. For \$75 their tomatoes can ripen in mid-air in the Upside Down Tomato Garden – a plastic planting bed supported by PVC pipes which looks like a cat's litter box on stilts.

Men can happily depart on business trips feeling confident that their toothbrushes will be sterilised in the Million-Germ-Eliminating Travel Toothbrush Sanitiser. It is a \$30 battery-powered device that uses germicidal UV technology to free the brush's bristles of germs.

And, in a democratic country such as the US, pets too are beneficiaries of a consumerist culture. The Advanced Large-Capacity Feline Drinking Fountain is a \$70 water bowl that continually circulates water through a fountain to encourage proper hydration.

For the same price, dogs can feed themselves with the Precise Portion Pet Feeder, which automatically dispenses the right portions so that, even if you have abandoned your dog for days, he will at least be well fed.

When you "enter" the sky "mall" you fall into one of two

categories: you either start to desire things you never even knew existed, or you feel deeply ashamed; on behalf of all silent consumer sceptics, of *The American Way*.

Personally, I was completely captivated by the technical ingenuity that had gone into inventing such over-the-top and profoundly unnecessary, albeit utilitarian, devices such as the Voice Recognition Grocery List Organiser for \$150.

Each gadget outdid the next. Pages upon pages of inventions, ranging from the outlandish to the idiotic, such as the air purifier shaped like a free-standing Japanese-style ornamental vase; or the hose bowl, which looks like a pot plant holder, but is really an empty vessel that conceals the coiled garden hose.

Granted, many gadgets serve a practical role, either in the garden or the home, but it's impossible to take it too seriously when confronted with an image of a Pop-Up Hot Dog Cooker, which looks like a toaster with two crescent-shaped holes for buns and two round holes for sausages.

Boiling water is the quintessential age-old chore. But from kettles to microwaves to "Hot Diggity Dogger" toasters, some of us have chosen to pay a price for convenience.

After hours of "window shopping", the air hostess came round to top up my glass of chardonnay, offer me dinner and dessert, more blankets, pillows and a hot towel for my face. "And if there is anything else you need ..." she said.

Sometimes, if you are just lucky, convenience is free.