

Fear of Flying?

It was something my husband always wanted to do. Something I never wanted to try

BY ALINE ALEXANDER NEWMAN, Turin, New York

ALASKA. WILD AND UNFORGIVING, home to glaciers and grizzly bears. It had been on our “places to go” list for a long time. Now after a year of planning, my husband, Neil, and I were finally there, cruising the Inside Passage on a small ship, taking in the awesome scenery. We had just come back from watching a pod of humpback whales when the expedition leader announced, “We have a special treat for Thursday.

Floatplane rides. A great way to see the wonders of Alaska. Anyone interested, please sign up.”

Oh, no. I sucked in my breath and felt my chest tighten. Neil would want to go. He loved flying. Not me. Just the thought of being airborne was enough to turn my stomach. I remember Neil calling me once from one of those seat-back phones on a flight he was taking for work. “Where are you?” I asked.

“About 25,000 feet above Missouri,”

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he said. I had to hang up, barely making it to the bathroom in time.

My fear of flying goes back to when I was eight years old. We were on a family vacation in the Adirondacks, and my father suggested we take a sightseeing ride in a seaplane. One look at the tiny pontoon plane bobbing in the water and my younger sister said no. My mom too seemed relieved to stay behind. "I'll go! I'll go!" I said, wanting to be the brave one. Dad lifted me into the plane.

No one had thought to warn me about the noise. As the plane's engine roared, I covered my ears and screamed in terror.

"Calm down," my dad shouted over the din as we lifted off. My stomach lurched. He pointed out the lakes and islands below. But I was too frightened to open my eyes. I screamed until the pilot landed.

As a young adult, I tried to shrug off my fears. "Grow up," I told myself. "Flying is very safe." But with every flight, my anxiety grew. I took one trip with a bad sinus infection. The cabin pressure made my ears and sinus cavities feel as if they were going to explode. I struggled to breathe and fought down panic. My childhood phobia returned full blast. I avoided air travel as much as possible.

Getting to Alaska by land had proved challenging enough. Neil and I took a train cross-country from our home in upstate New York to Seattle, Washington. We had a brief—albeit nerve-shattering—flight to meet our

ship in Alaska. I booked an aisle seat and brought a cliff-hanger of a novel to read. "Don't talk to me," I told Neil. I wanted to pretend I wasn't even in the air. Still, by the time we landed, my body was rigid with tension.

No way was I going to get on a floatplane for some more Alaska sightseeing. Neil could do it solo.

On his own, he'd talked to the woman in charge of the flights. He really wanted to go, and as it turned out none of our traveling companions had signed up. The woman had gone to great trouble to convince a fellow employee to go along and then found a pilot who agreed to take up only three passengers—me included.

"We don't have to go if you don't want to..." Neil said. But if I didn't go, then there wouldn't be enough passengers and the whole thing would be called off.

I took a deep breath and feigned a smile. "Okay," I said. "I'll go." I would do it for Neil.

I hardly slept that night. I tossed and turned. What if the plane engine conked out? What if we crashed into a mountain? Or got struck by lightning? Maybe it would rain so hard, the flight would have to be canceled.

We woke up in the morning to blue skies. We strapped on life jackets and boarded a Zodiac inflatable motorboat that would take us to the seaplane. As soon as I'd seen it tied to the dock, a 1979 blue and white Cessna, I couldn't believe my eyes. I'd expected it to be small but not *tiny*. There was more

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room inside our minivan back home than in that plane. I had to crouch down just to get in the back seat. “Is this your first time flying in a small plane?” I asked the other passenger. She nodded.

“Mine too,” the pilot said, jokingly.

I tried joining in on the laugh, but silently I begged the Lord for courage... and a strong stomach. Then I demanded the truth. “Been flying these planes for 30 years,” the man reassured me. Then he passed out headphones.

Headphones. If only I’d had headphones when I flew as a child.

I said another prayer and gripped the seat. We raced across the water and the plane shook like a vibrating bed—at least the headphones muted the engine’s roar. Then takeoff. The roar faded. The buildings on shore shrank to dollhouse size. Higher and higher we climbed, rising above a vast forest of evergreens. My grip relaxed. I even dared to hold up my cell phone to the window to take pictures.

LeConte Glacier hove into view. It looked like a massive river of ice—blue-tinged and bordered by jagged rows of mountains. The surface seemed rough, as if the water had frozen mid-wave.


Click, click. I snapped several photos in quick succession. I was breathless but not with fear. With wonder. We soared over windswept cliffs, sparkling blue lakes and snow-covered mountaintops. I dropped my phone in my lap and simply soaked up the scenery. Nothing fazed me. Not even approaching clouds or the raindrops bouncing off the windshield like grains of rice.



INTREPID Aline (here with her husband, Neil, in Alaska) did the thing she feared most.

This was God’s country, and I was seeing it from above, as God might. As he wanted me to. Not from the perspective of my fears but from a place where I could take in its beauty. We followed a blue-green river dotted with chunks of ice. Then the pilot turned, and we dropped close enough to see goats scaling the cliffs and seals lounging on the ice floes, God’s creatures.

I would have missed all this if I’d listened to my fears. Neil turned to me and took my picture. I was smiling, not from relief but from joy. The joy that comes from seeing the world with new eyes. As someone wise once said, “Do the thing you fear most and the death of fear is certain.”

“That was great!” I said after we landed. It had been. Truly, the flight of a lifetime. 

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