

Up in the Air

Last year, a young man

walked into the Seattle

airport and took the

next flight to anywhere

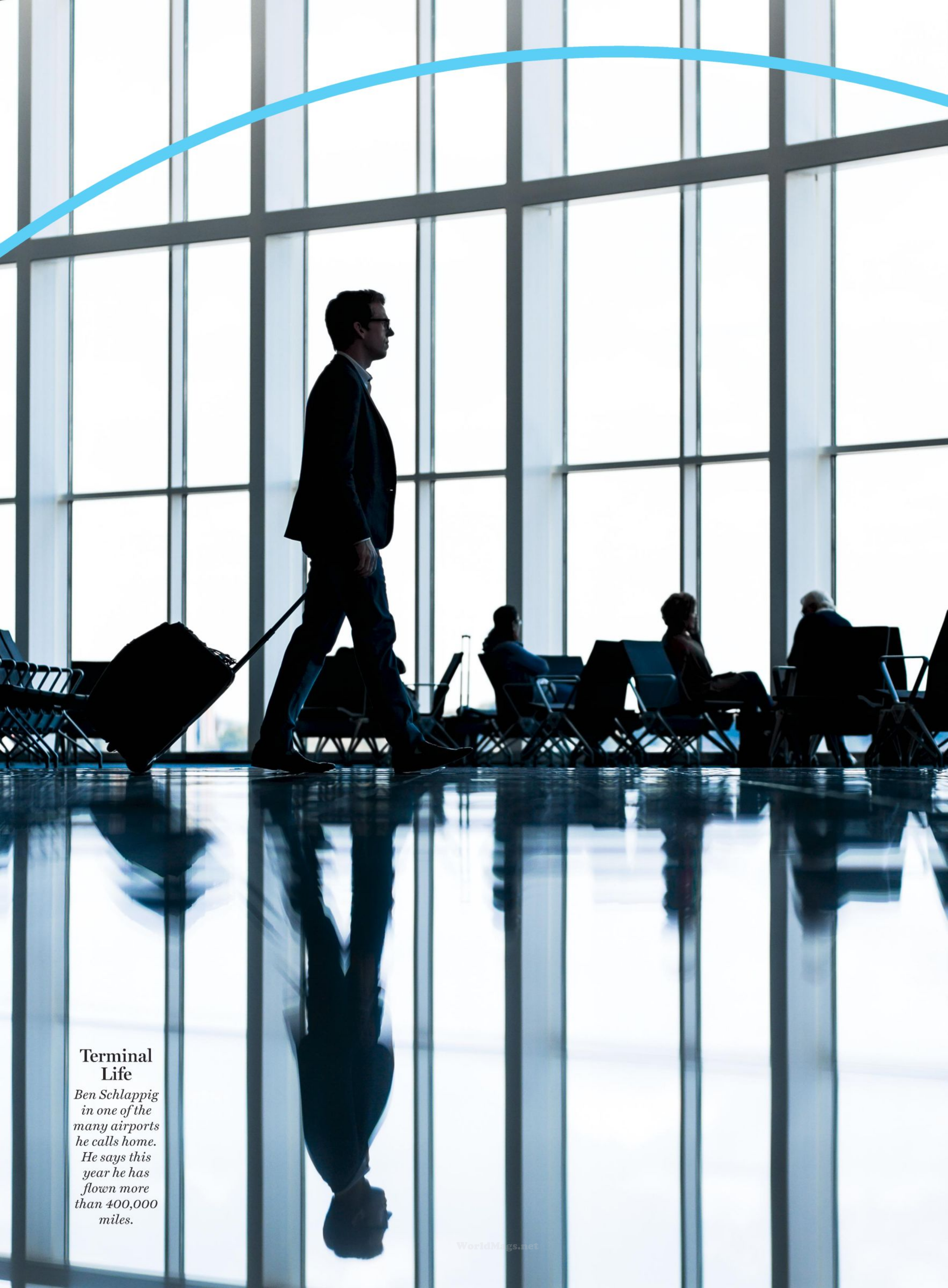
—and he hasn't come

down since

By Ben Wofford

THE BOARDING PROCEDURE has barely started at Chicago O'Hare, and Ben Schlappig has already taken over the first-class cabin. Inside Cathay Pacific Flight 807 bound for Hong Kong, he's passing out a couple of hundred dollars' worth of designer chocolates to a small swarm of giggling flight attendants. The six suites in this leather-bound playpen of faux mahogany and fresh-cut flowers comprise the inner sanctum of commercial flight that few ever witness. They're mostly empty now, save for two men in their

*Photographs by
Bryan Derballa*



Terminal Life

Ben Schlappig in one of the many airports he calls home. He says this year he has flown more than 400,000 miles.

twenties who seem even giddier than the flight attendants. The two stand to greet him. “This is so cool!” exclaims one, and soon Schlappig is ordering champagne for everyone.

This sort of thing happens to Schlappig nearly everywhere he goes. On this trip, his fans will witness Schlappig’s latest mission: a weekend jaunt that will slingshoot him across East Asia – Hong Kong, Jakarta, Tokyo – and back to New York, in 69 hours. He’ll rarely leave the airports, and when he does he’ll rest his head only in luxury hotels. With wide ears, Buddy Holly glasses and a shock of strawberry-blond hair, Schlappig resembles Ralphie from *A Christmas Story* if he’d grown up to become a J. Crew model. Back beyond the curtain in business class, a dozen jowly faces cast a stony gaze on the crescendos of laughter and spilled champagne – another spoiled trust-fund kid, they’ve judged, living off his parents’ largesse. But Schlappig has a job. This is his job.

Schlappig, 25, is one of the biggest stars among an elite group of obsessive flyers whose mission is to outwit the airlines. They’re self-styled competitors with a singular objective: fly for free, as much as they can, without getting caught. In the past 20 years, the Internet has drawn together this strange band of savants with an odd mix of skills: the digital talent of a code writer, a lawyer’s love affair with fine print, and a passion for airline bureaucracy. It’s a whirring hive mind of IT whizzes, stats majors, aviation nerds and everyone else you knew who skipped the prom.

Schlappig owes his small slice of fame to his blog “One Mile at a Time,” a diary of a young man living the life of the world’s most implausible airline ad. Posting as often as six times a day, he metes out meticulous counsel on the art of travel hacking – known in this world as the Hobby. It’s not simply how-to tips that draw his fans, it’s the vicarious thrill of Schlappig’s non-stop-luxury life – one recent flight with a personal shower and butler service, or the time Schlappig was chauffeured across a tarmac in a Porsche. But his fans aren’t just travel readers – they’re gamers, and Schlappig is teaching them how to win.

“I’m very fortunate in that I do what I love,” says Schlappig, stretching out in an ergonomic armchair as we reach 30,000 feet and just before the mushroom consommé arrives. In the past year, since ditching the Seattle apartment he shared with his ex-boyfriend, he’s flown more than 400,000 miles, enough to circumnavigate the globe 16 times. It’s been 43 exhausting weeks since he slept in a bed that wasn’t in a hotel, and he spends an aver-

His mission is to outwit the airlines and fly first class, for free, as much as he can, without getting caught.

age of six hours daily in the sky. He has a freewheeling itinerary, often planning his next destination upon hitting the airport. Just last week, he rocketed through Dallas, Dubai, Oman, Barcelona and Frankfurt. Yet for all his travel, it would be a mistake to call Schlappig a nomad. The moment that he whiffs the airless ambience of a pressurized cabin, he’s home.

“An airplane is my bedroom,” he says, stretching to reach his complimentary slippers. “It’s my office, and it’s my playroom.” The privilege of reclining in this personal suite costs around \$15,000. Schlappig typically makes this trip when he’s bored on the weekend. He pays for it like he pays for everything: with a sliver of his gargantuan cache of frequent-flyer miles that grows only bigger by the day. Hong Kong, he says, is his favorite hub, and “the only

city I could ever live in.” The 16-hour trip has become so routine that it’s begun to feel like a pajama-clad blur of champagne and caviar – or, in Schlappig’s terminology, a “two-hangover flight.”

As the sun descends over the polar circle, a recumbent Schlappig loses himself in a *2 Broke Girls* marathon playing on a free-standing flatscreen. “The fact is, we are beating the airlines at their own game,” he said last year at a gathering of the Hobby’s top talent. “The people who run these programs are idiots.” Then he paused. “And we’ll always be one step ahead of them.”

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CHLAPPIG WASN’T SO MUCH INTRODUCED to his fixation as he was raised by it. Born in New York, he became obsessed with airplanes as a small child, endlessly reciting aircraft models and issuing flight announcements from the back of his parents’ car. “Benjamin was always different than my two other boys,” says his mom, Barbara. “Teachers told me, ‘He’s ahead of everything.’ He was bored.”

Around age 13, he discovered the website FlyerTalk, a massive free-for-all forum of all things airline, where users meet to strategize over deals, test for cracks in the bureaucracy and share the spoils. There, Schlappig found a global community playing a massively complex game set upon three basic components.

One of the fundamental steps a Hobbyist can take is choosing an airline to compete for top-tier loyalty status; Schlappig chose United. Nothing was free up front – the object of the game was a return on investment. A Hobbyist doesn’t spend unless he can get the same or greater value in return. It took Schlappig about a year to master the dozens of convoluted techniques, exploiting mistakes in ticketing algorithms and learning the ins and outs of the frequent-flyer programs airlines had created after deregulation in the late 1970s. The second leg of the game is credit cards – collecting and canceling as many as possible, and deploying a series of tricks to reap the reward points that bank-and-airline-card partnerships would virtually give away. As he delved deeper, Schlappig learned about a third level, a closely guarded practice called Manufacture Spend, where Hobbyists harness the power of the multitudes of credit cards in their pockets. Airline-affiliated credit cards award points for every dollar spent, so over the decades, Hobbyists manipulated the system by putting purchases on credit cards without ultimately spending anything at all. At its simplest, this included purchasing dollar coins from the U.S. Mint with a credit card and immediately using them to pay off the charge. Schlappig read one detailed post after another that insisted Manufacture Spend was the only true way to fly for free – like sliding a coin into a slot machine and yanking it back with clear string.

Eventually, the best way he learned to visualize this bureaucratic gamesmanship was to see it as a series of table games on a sprawling casino floor – and if the airlines were the house, Schlappig realized, the Hobbyists were the card-counters.

Exceptionally bright and equally motivated, Schlappig saw a way of convincing his parents: by showing them how they could visit family in Germany paying less in first class than flying economy. From there, his parents grew to fully indulge his obsession. By the time he was 15, they were delivering him to the airport on Saturdays and retrieving him Sunday nights at baggage claim. “It was an interesting hobby,” says his dad, Arno, as cicadas chirp outside the St. Petersburg, Florida, condo their son bought them after the blog took off. “I said, ‘Hey! Keep it up. It’s better than smoking pot.’” On a typical weekend, Schlappig would hopscotch to the West Coast and back – Tampa, Chicago, San Francisco, L.A., never exiting the airports. “Some of his friends knew,” Arno says. “The teachers I don’t think were aware of it.”

This is BEN WOFFORD’s first ROLLING STONE piece. He traveled to three countries for this story as Schlappig’s guest.

Despite his high IQ, Schlappig was an apathetic student. He attended an all-boys Catholic school, where he struggled to fit in. “When his homework was done, he went back to his room on FlyerTalk,” Arno recalls. “And he just posted and posted.” Hobbyists say the game takes years to master. But at 16, Schlappig became the first known member to fly across the Pacific Ocean six times in one trip – Chicago, Osaka, San Francisco, Seoul and back again – in July 2006. By his 17th birthday, he’d logged half a million miles. That year, Schlappig was elected to FlyerTalk’s governing TalkBoard; in 2009, he ascended to vice president, second to Gary Leff, now 40, one of the Hobby’s most popular bloggers. (Schlappig calls Leff “the

the only thing that seemed to calm her son. They drove to the airport and sat together in silence, watching the airplanes take off and land. “His eyes were all sparkled,” she says, remembering their daylong outings.

Eventually, the family relocated to Tampa, where Ben attended grade school and discovered his obsession. “You know, in retrospect, they were crazy for letting me fly,” Ben says. Marc was 14 going on 30 – overstressed and Ivy League-bound, intensely focused on planning for law school while studying French and Latin on top of his native German and English. Then, one day, he was gone. “By the time it came around to me,” Ben continues, “the approach my mom had was, ‘Life is too short not to take up what you love.’”

Throughout high school, his jet-setting accelerated, as he crisscrossed the country on his beloved United Airlines. For the first time, he had found a place to belong. When Ben was 16, he earned elite status, proudly brandishing his Premier 1K card wherever he flew. He found he connected socially with Hobbyists far better than with classmates, and he started organizing meet-ups around the country, advertising them on FlyerTalk.

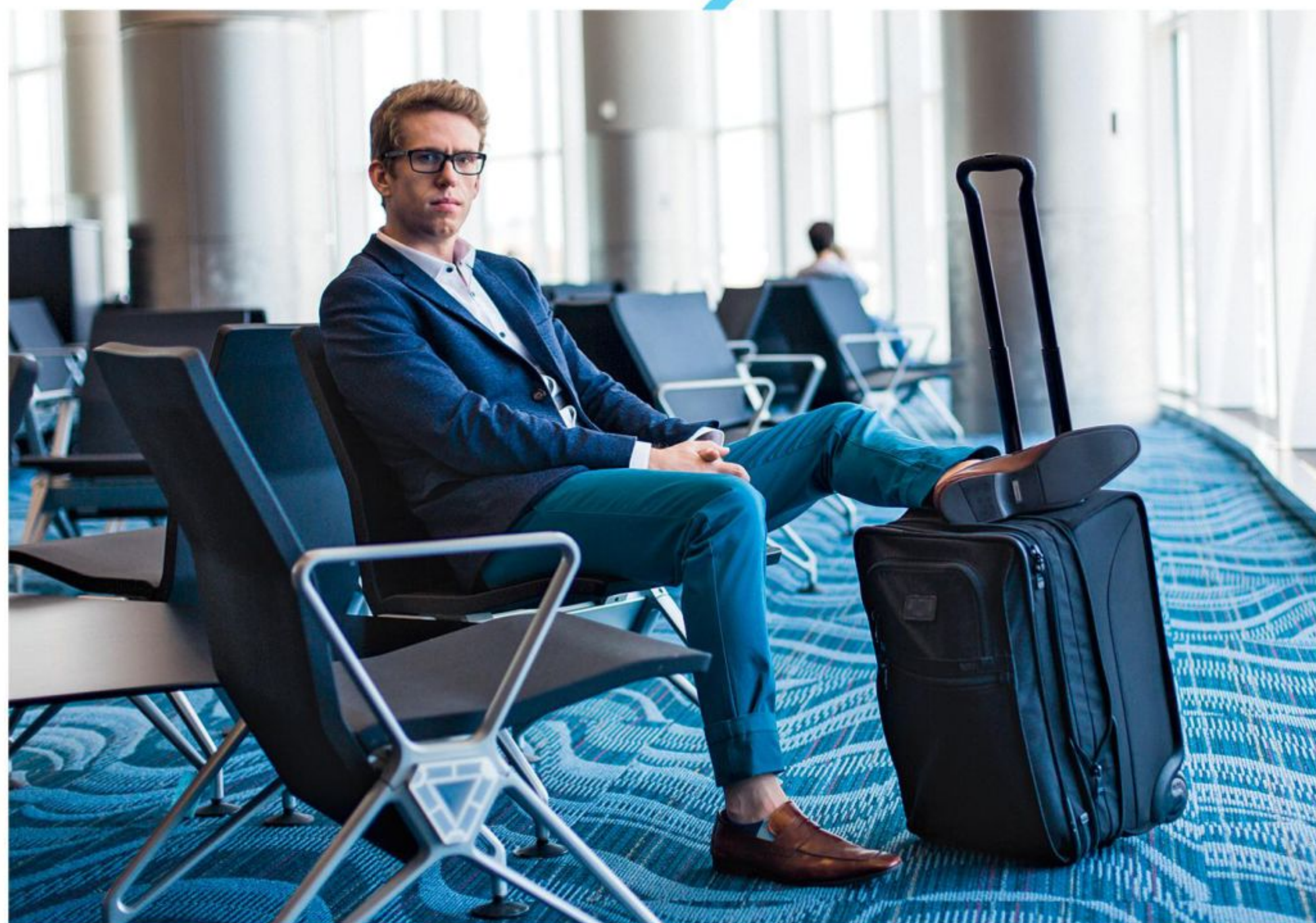
In the fall of 2007, Schlappig enrolled at the only college he applied to, the University of Florida, without ever visiting. He was bored almost instantly, filling the emptiness with travel and FlyerTalk. The following February, Schlappig launched “One Mile at a Time,” and he began speaking at airline-sponsored events, wonky consortiums where airline employees and frequent flyers could mingle. It was at one such gathering at San Francisco International in 2009 that the 19-year-old Schlappig met Alex Pourazari, another teenager who’d become a member of Schlappig’s rapidly growing following. “I was

such a fanboy – so embarrassing,” recalls Pourazari. “I still have that adoring e-mail I sent him. It cracks me up. I go look at it sometimes, just to remind myself how far we’ve come.” The two quickly became best friends, together plotting ever-more-dizzying flight routes to challenge each other’s game.

“We were like brothers,” says Pourazari, who now lives in Seattle. “It was more like we were best friends than anything. Then we both realized that we were gay. And we grew up together.”

They logged hundreds of hours in the air together, rarely leaving airports. This practice – called mileage running, or flying incessantly on steeply discounted flights to accrue frequent-flyer miles – is a foundation of the Hobby, what dribbling is to basketball. Schlappig and Pourazari took their first mileage run on Valentine’s Day 2010. On one run, they hit seven airports from Tampa en route to Hawaii, turning straight back without even breathing the air in the parking lot.

For the next year and a half, as their friendship grew into a romance, they continued to perfect their techniques; one favorite was called flight bumping. At the time, airlines often oversold their flights, and passengers who voluntarily gave up their seats got a free ride on the next one, plus a \$400 voucher. Oversold flights are supposedly chance occurrences, but using software popularized in the Hobby for collating obscure Federal Aviation Administration data, Schlappig and Pourazari became masters of predicting when flights would bump. It was free money. The two would stand side by side in front of a terminal’s sprawling



The High Life

“An airplane is my bedroom,” says Schlappig, who’s flown enough this year to circumnavigate the globe 16 times. “It’s my office, it’s my playroom. I’m very fortunate to do what I love.”

Godfather” of the Hobby; the two e-mail each other daily.)

“I was scared at the beginning,” Barbara says. “I mean, what mom lets her son fly at such a young age around the country, right?” U.S. air marshals wondered the same thing when they once hauled Schlappig off a plane after glimpsing his baffling itinerary, demanding to speak to his parents. “I think the reason they let him fly around as a kid, and why they let him follow his passion,” says one friend close to the Schlappig family, “was because they already had one kid who basically left too early.”

BEN WAS THREE WHEN HIS ELDEST brother, Marc, just days after his 14th birthday, was killed in a horrific accident. He’d been riding a jetski his parents had rented when a drunk driver struck him with a boat. The family was devastated, and for young Ben the loss was particularly hard. His father, who worked for a bank, was only around on weekends. “Marc had been like a father to Ben,” Barbara says. “He was everything.”

For the next year, Ben refused to go to preschool, and when he did, the teachers couldn’t stop his screaming. Eventually they told Barbara to keep Ben home. On the worst days, Barbara did

monitors, arguing over the best contenders like they were picking greyhounds at the track.

Soon, Schlappig began studying the rules of so-called apology vouchers. As a conciliatory gesture for anything broken on a given flight, United offered coupons to passengers worth \$200 or \$400. Every time he boarded a plane, Schlappig looked for something broken – a headset or an overhead light – and racked up the coupons. “When a system can easily be exploited, it’s tempting to push it to its limits, for the game of it alone,” Schlappig says. “Especially combined with the arrogant confidence only a teenager can have.”

During his senior year, he carelessly bragged to a *New York Times* travel reporter that he had amassed more than \$10,000 in bumping vouchers. A few weeks later, Schlappig says, just before his last college final exam, in April 2011, he received a certified letter from United, cheerily informing him that because he had taken advantage of the system his frequent-flyer account was permanently suspended. He was banned from flying, he recalls the letter saying, unless he paid the company \$4,755 – the amount it claimed as losses through Schlappig’s techniques.

“I mean, how do you define ‘taking advantage of’?” Schlappig asks, passing a hand towel back to a doting attendant as we fly over the South China Sea. “Was I seriously inconvenienced to the tune of \$200 every time my audio wasn’t working? No. But they create the system.” (United officials will not comment on the record on Schlappig’s case, other than to say, “We don’t take steps

“There’s a joke: I’m not heterosexual, I’m not homosexual, I’m arosexual,” says Schlappig’s ex-boyfriend.

toward limiting member engagement with the program unless we see acts of fraud or other serious violations.”) Schlappig has repeatedly offered to send United a check but has gotten no response. “While it doesn’t justify anything, I think it became more about the game in those years,” he says. “And while I was far from the only one playing, I thought I was the best.”

Just weeks after receiving his banishment letter from United, Schlappig graduated with a degree in marketing. He stayed in Tampa, still dating Pourazari by airplane, and after going on a few corporate interviews, he decided to take a chance and turn the Hobby into a career. That summer, with Pourazari on board, he incorporated PointsPros, a consultancy that helps customers build itineraries out of frequent-flyer miles.

“We were just plane geeks, plain and simple,” Pourazari says. He stops midsentence on the phone to call out the models of planes as they pass over his balcony. “There’s a joke: I’m not heterosexual, I’m not homosexual, I’m arosexual.”

With their inscrutably complex rules, the airlines had created a market of hopelessly confused vacationers, and PointsPros immediately found itself in demand. After a year of dealing with a staggering workload and a long-distance relationship, Schlappig decided to move in with Pourazari in the Seattle suburb of Bellevue. During the move, in the fall of 2012, Schlappig met with fellow Hobbyist Tiffany Funk in O’Hare, and he recruited her to join the company. She arrived to find the pair on the brink of a stress-induced implosion. “Things grew really fast,” recalls Funk, 31, who lives with her husband in San Diego. “And Ben was totally not prepared.”

After a year, Schlappig’s relationship with Pourazari completely unwound, and Schlappig found little holding him to the ground. “At that point, I was like, ‘Screw it,’” he remembers. “I

decided I might as well do this full-time.” In April 2014, at the end of his lease, he walked into Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. He hasn’t come down since.

IN 1979, AS DEREGULATION TRANSFORMED the airline business from a monitored public good into corporate America’s new Wild West, an ad executive named Bill Bernbach hatched a marketing scheme that would change air travel forever, by incentivizing sporadic customers to become returning flyers. Bernbach proposed to his client American Airlines that it reward customers with free travel. Two years later, the first frequent-flyer program was born, and the rest of the industry scrambled to join the arms race.

The Hobby followed soon after, pioneered by a triumphant menswear clothing manager and moonlighting aviation nut named Randy Petersen, of Sioux City, Iowa. In 1986, Petersen founded an aviation magazine called *Inside Flyer* with \$800 and no publishing experience. “I’m not a business guy, I’m a surfer-dude guy,” Petersen says. “I kind of figured out how to earn free travel when these programs were just starting out.” In a bright-yellow trucker hat over wild bleach-white hair, the 63-year-old looks like a cross between Jesse Ventura and Doc Watson from *Back to the Future*. Early editions of Petersen’s magazine featured stories on deals from obscure carriers; instructed fliers on how to duck airline countermeasures; and showed readers how they could win a thousand free miles by subscribing to magazines like *Esquire*. By 1993, *Inside Flyer* had 90,000 readers. Two years later, Petersen took the community online as FlyerTalk.

Almost at once, FlyerTalk became the singular worldwide hub of airline nerds, and today it claims to have more than 500,000 members. Virtually nothing on FlyerTalk is meant to be understood by outsiders. Posts there are littered with jargon like “3xx” (Airbus), “open jaw” (three-segment round trip) and “FEBO” (in-flight meal delivery). So Petersen’s next move was to launch BoardingArea, a content platform for public consumption that featured FlyerTalk’s biggest stars on their own blogs.

This was where Schlappig launched “One Mile at a Time.” Immediately he became one of the Hobby’s biggest stars and, according to his friends, a millionaire. His revenue comes from three sources: impression-based ads on the blog; the PointsPros consultancy; and “affiliate marketing,” which means collecting a commission from credit-card companies each time a card sign-up originates from his blog. Schlappig admits that affiliate marketing gives him a vested interest in the very companies that many Hobbyists game. A garden-variety Hobbyist owns at least a dozen credit cards; many have more than 40.

Amassing a large cache of credit cards is essential to Manufacture Spend. No topic of discussion produces more worried glances or tighter lips – a code of silence is central to Hobby culture. Manufacture Spend reveals a fundamental but overlooked truth about frequent-flyer miles: They’ve become, in essence, a currency. In 2012, a European Central Bank paper classified airline miles in the same category as bitcoin, citing a 2005 calculation by *The Economist* that valued the global stock of frequent-flyer miles at more than \$700 billion. But if miles are currency, then airlines are like central bankers who can constantly change the rules, devalue the points and close accounts at will. In 2009, one frequent flyer sued Northwest Airlines for closing his account, insisting that he never broke the program rules. The case rose to the Supreme Court, which sided with Northwest last year, reasoning that the 1970s deregulation left the terms of

these programs entirely up to the airlines. In essence, airlines, not customers, owned the frequent-flyer miles, and an airline's latitude for shuttering an account is wide – similar to the right casinos enjoy to kick out card-counters.

Schlappig is giving me this economics lesson while he waits in the spa of the first-class Virgin Atlantic Clubhouse in JFK Airport in New York. He has been up all night, downing eight cups of coffee and typing blog posts the entire flight; he maintains a militant work regimen, blogging only on Eastern time, jet lag be damned. "I think he's not a person who was meant to work from nine to five," says his mother. "Now he probably works 18 hours a day." Schlappig is chatting through a complimentary massage, enjoying the elbow in his back from a plump spa therapist and straining occasionally to sip his dry gin with crème de mûre. She chats him back, smiling, and asks how he's been – Schlappig knows almost the entire staff here by name, and he schedules his globe-trots to make a pit stop here every few weeks.

He's treated equally well by flight attendants, who are among his rowdiest fans. When a chief steward recognized him on one superluxury carrier, Schlappig stepped into his onboard shower to find a bottle of Dom Pérignon on ice waiting for him. On a recent international flight, an attendant maneuvered an unwitting Schlappig into an empty row, administering what he delicately terms a surprising and unwanted hand job. ("It was a disaster," he says. "I tried to get out, but there was no point.")

Despite his success, many in the Hobby think the days of hopscotching across the globe are numbered. Paranoia is the lingua franca of all Hobbyists, and now is a good time to be pessimistic. Earlier this year, Delta and United both switched to revenue-based reward systems: Frequent-flyer miles are now awarded by total dollars spent, effectively ending the practice of mileage running. Schlappig seems unconcerned. "I've been at this for 10 years," he says. "And there's not a single year where I didn't hear at one point or another, 'This is coming to an end.' But every year, we find new opportunities. We're one step ahead of them."

For some, the game has evolved from a wonkish pastime into an ends-justified obsession with beating the airlines – less *Rain Man*, more *Ocean's Eleven*. While the game's traditional methods remain technically legal, these Hobbyists – imagine them as the Deep Web of the Hobby – use tactics that routinely violate airline terms and conditions, techniques that can span a gradient from clever and harmless to borderline theft. (Schlappig concedes that he pushes the rules but insists he is careful not to break any laws.) Take the practice of "hidden-city ticketing" – booking your layover as your final destination, like buying a ticket from Point A to Point C, then sneaking away at B – or "fuel dumping," a booking technique that confuses the price algorithm to deduct the cost of fuel from a ticket, often at an enormous discount. In this strange and risky world, black markets exist where brokers buy and sell miles, and Hobbyists pay others to fly in their names.

They also write custom code to hunt the Web for "mistake fares" posted accidentally by airlines and hotels. "My friend can

write one of these scripts in two hours," one Hobbyist tells me. "These are huge companies, and they don't write a simple code to double-check their prices. It blows me away." He recently used a custom script to book a Westin presidential suite for \$10.

"These people have the ability to cause serious financial harm," says Henry Harteveldt, an industry analyst and former airline loyalty-program manager. Harteveldt has spent decades studying the Hobby and the airlines – a war of attrition, he says, between two equally obsessive tribes with very long memories. "No one's hands are clean in this fight," he adds. "The gamers have dirt on their hands, and airlines have dirt on their hands." For now, the Hobby's principal advantage remains its size – tiny enough, he says, to avoid the attention of the airlines' gargantuan bureaucracy. But for Hobbyists tempted by dreams of mastering the game and beating the house, Harteveldt offers a warning. "Ultimately," he says, "the house always wins."

FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS, THE COMMERCIAL airline industry has been mulling how to solve a problem like the Hobby. "The airlines basically thought they could manage it down," Harteveldt says. "Today, they'll never be able to shut it down entirely." For years, a de facto standoff ensued, with each side equally invested in keeping the travel-going public none the wiser.

This past winter, however, the airlines seemed to have unveiled a new strategy. Following the example of the music industry

in the early 2000s, they have taken to suing small fry in the interest of making an example. In November, United joined the travel site Orbitz in a lawsuit against a 22-year-old computer-science major named Aktarer Zaman, creator of the website Skiplagged, a Hobbyist version of Expedia that's brought the technique of hidden-city ticketing into mass consumption. In April, an Illinois judge threw out the claim; United has vowed to appeal.

"They're using the public's lack of knowledge in order to profit greatly," says Zaman, a stick-thin kid who looks barely old enough to shave, stuttering in a nervous mumble. "I'm helping increase the efficiency of the market. This is good for society." Zaman reads Schlappig's blog, and in January he appeared with him on HuffPost Live, where they defended the practice.

Last December, Schlappig joined a slate of popular Boarding-Area bloggers at the Frequent Traveler University, a weekend boot camp hosted at a Hyatt in Arlington, Virginia. Roughly 150 people assembled for the advanced seminar's three days of PowerPoints from the Hobby's top talent; most of those in attendance are white and in middle management or IT, but plenty are college kids.

Inside a jam-packed seminar room, Schlappig delivers an emphatic lecture on complex flight segments. He's followed by his fellow bloggers – speaking at a white-hot clip in the alien dialect of airline legal departments. A chiseled twentysomething named Scott Mackenzie makes his case for why airline [Cont. on 70]



Winging It

Schlappig enjoying the benefits of his first-class life (above). He's been obsessed with planes since he was a boy (right, with his brother Michael). "Who lets her son fly at such a young age around the country?" says their mom. "But Ben's not a person meant to work nine to five."



UP IN THE AIR

[Cont. from 57] website search results are incomplete and misleading. Hans, a baby-faced linebacker from Minnesota, explains the finer points of gaming customer-service agents to accrue credit-card points. A Russian-born math-professor-turned-finance teaches Manufacture Spend. A disheveled former White House staffer leads a seminar titled simply “Hacking United.” “This is their Game Boy,” says Petersen, one of the Hobby’s founding fathers, of the younger recruits enchanted by Schlappig’s success. “They don’t play World of Warcraft – they figure out how to do mileage runs.”

The darker element of the Hobby is said to network at these events. If you have the skills, you may get an invitation to join one of the bands that operate anonymously around the world. These groups use secure servers and private e-mail groups to communicate. “There’s one that I’m on,” says Gary Leff, referring to an online group, stressing that he joined only to monitor the chatter. “Others I’ve had access to don’t know.” Schlappig for a time practiced Manufacture Spend, but, perhaps still haunted by United, he’s decided that anything riskier lies beyond the pale. “Some of it’s the shadiest stuff I’ve ever seen,” he tells me. “That’s why I don’t do a lot of this crap anymore.”

In multiple interviews, airline representatives insist that Schlappig and FlyerTalk represent little more than a portal for passionate customers. But mention the Hobby’s darker side, and they turn grave. “If any members of these groups were particularly effective, they could have a catastrophic effect on an airline,” says Jonathan Clarkson, director of Southwest Airlines’ rewards program.

Ever since the Skiplagged lawsuit, a new perception has grown that it might be airlines, and not Hobbyists, that are in over their heads. If true, it’s a development that wouldn’t lack for poetic justice, says Tim Wu, a professor at Columbia Law School and a frequent writer on airline policy. Before deregulation, the price for a given seat remained fixed. But today, says Wu, the range of prices that customers might get charged for the very same seat is spectacularly wide. “They made a normal activity suddenly like going to a casino,” he says. “A lot of people get shafted. But it also creates an opportunity for people who can break the system and live like Schlappig. They’re chasing around these people who are trying to game a system that they themselves set up.”

IT’S AFTER MIDNIGHT IN DOWNTOWN Hong Kong, and after crossing the Pacific on another 16-hour flight, raccoon-eyed and hair mussed, Schlappig looks like he was just let out of school for the day. He’s riding a buzz equal parts champagne and coffee, and he has found

himself in his favorite city once again. Tonight, a cab has dumped him curbside at the five-star Hong Kong Hyatt. “There’s something indescribable in the air here,” he murmurs. “You’ll catch on to it.”

Schlappig has barely stepped off the elevator into the hotel’s glistening VIP lounge when someone shouts, “Is that who I think it is?” Two stout men and a blonde see a beaming Schlappig heading toward them, all hugs and first names. In the Hobby, a run-in like this is an occasion for yet another bottle of champagne.

One hour in, and the three are swapping stories about the time they met the teenage Schlappig at a Hobby party he organized in Sausalito, California. The woman at the table is a corporate lawyer from New York, one of the Hobby’s few females. “I met him, and I was like, ‘Oh, my God,’” she recalls. “‘This kid is, like, in high school.’” Each person at the table has concocted a story for their co-workers or friends about where they disappear to on weekends. But this evening, they’ve found one another in the Hong Kong night. Schlappig spills champagne on himself as he raises his glass for a toast: “So much for lonely, right?”

The next morning, Schlappig is fighting off a hangover as he trudges through Hong Kong International for a flight to Jakarta. He sighs. “I don’t really physically associate anything with being home,” he says, “but this is about as close as it gets.” Bag in tow, he pauses to gaze at the sprawling indoor pavilion. “The Hong Kong airport, the Virgin Atlantic Clubhouse at JFK – I do feel at home there,” he muses. “It’s weird.” Soon, it will be a year since he gave up his apartment in Seattle. He ponders the thought with a glass of white wine somewhere over the Indian Ocean, but for the first time he betrays a note of sadness in his blank smile. “Absolutely, it’s isolating,” he admits. “There are nights where it’s 3 a.m. in Guangzhou, China, and you’re like, ‘Oh, I could actually be in L.A. having fun with friends.’ And there’s nothing to do here.”

Or anywhere: His trip reports betray a theme, in photo after photo entirely devoid of human companionship: empty lounges, first-class menus, embroidered satin pillows – inanimate totems of a five-star existence. On our next flight, a seven-hour run from Jakarta International to Tokyo, Schlappig tries to get himself motivated about the champagne selection, holding forth on the best meal pairings with a \$200 bottle of Krug. But there are no fans waiting to surprise him here. An elderly Japanese couple sleep in the corner. Otherwise, the cabin is deserted. Many air carriers long ago made the judgment to let first-class suites go unfilled, at the risk of tainting the marketable aura of exclusivity.

“I do what I love,” Schlappig whispers, perhaps more to himself, trying not to wake the couple. “You have to understand: This has always been my passion.” His words trail off, and he closes his eyes.

“Being in your twenties is hard – being a gay guy in your twenties is even harder,” says Nick Dierman, a close friend of Schlappig and a fellow Hobbyist. “Life’s a challenge. I think this is his way of escaping it.” Some of his friends have floated the idea that Ben should become a lawyer. “Why do that?” he asks, more than slightly annoyed. “Why would I want to sit in an office all day when I can just fly around the world?”

By the time the plane touches down in Tokyo, Schlappig has been in seven countries in seven days. He scoops his things and drifts wordlessly to the exit. It’s still dark outside at Tokyo Narita Airport, and at this hour the palace-size structure is nearly empty. A woman sleeps at a McDonald’s table, head back and mouth open, the faint echoes of a vacuum cleaner whirring in some far-off corridor.

In three hours, he’ll be on a flight bound for the States, and to his dismay he finds the VIP lounge still locked. With a pout, he plops down among the waiting area’s bleak cookie-cutter chairs. Assuming the death of the Hobby doesn’t prove imminent, Schlappig repeatedly insists that his life can go on forever this way. But he also announces, genuinely, that he wants to settle down one day. “That’s exactly what he wants to do,” says Pourazari. “But he can’t. He doesn’t know how.”

Passing the time here in the dark morning contrasts starkly with the most cherished thrill of his life in first class: After the champagne bottles are empty, he’ll be struck with the sudden urge to return to New Delhi. There, tucked in a corner of Indira Gandhi International Airport, he’ll find a perch and study the arrivals hall. “You see a whole family, 20 people, picking up someone at the airport,” he says. “People with signs, people with balloons, with flowers. There’s something beautiful about that.” He’ll watch for a few hours, pondering the stories behind the reunions and the cries of laughter that come with each new flight. But he still can’t decide if what he’s just seen is a vision of his past or the future.

“The world is so big, I can keep running,” Schlappig says. “At the same time, it makes you realize the world is so small.” After a long pause, he continues, “I want what I can’t have. There’s nothing gratifying about that. It’s crazy, and it’s fucked up. I’d still like to think I’m a reasonably happy person.” He grins. “Despite all that.”

Soon, a message comes over the PA system in muffled Japanese. He leaps to his feet, still the 10th-grader at the bell, transfixed once more by the prospect of escaping for the weekend and exploring the world. Schlappig angles through the terminal, the low purr of his rolling carry-on resounding across the cages of an empty bazaar. He’s picking up the pace now, bounding down the empty hallway, ready to take off. At sunrise, the shops will reopen, the terminal will roar back to life. But by then, he will be gone. **TS**