WHAT IT'S REALLY LIKE TO BE A PILOT

News / Airlines

As told to Arielle Pardes

Dina* had been fascinated by airplanes since she was a little girl. So she went to an aviation college and graduated with a degree in aviation business. She then worked for a firm that designed master plans for airports, and although she liked the industry, the desk job wasn't for her. She applied to be a flight attendant and loved everything about it — from the erratic schedule to the nonstop travel — but as she started meeting more airline pilots, including several woman pilots, she realized she'd rather be inside the cockpit than pushing the beverage cart down the aisle.

So she enrolled in flight school, working full-time as a flight attendant throughout her training so she could graduate debt-free. Her training demanded a thorough understanding of everything from the mechanics of the aircraft, to navigation using flight instruments, to the aerodynamics of the plane. She worked as a pilot for regional airlines before landing her current job as a first officer for a major commercial airline.

Regional airlines can only afford to pay their pilots so much, which is part of the reason there's a "pilot shortage." It can cost well into the six figures to get your education, but then you can get stuck making $35,000 or $40,000 a year. It's super-expensive to log training flight time — you have to rent a plane, pay for the gas, and pay for an instructor to go up with you. To rent a basic jet, you're talking probably $250 an hour with gas, not including a flight instructor, who usually charges between $25 and $50 an hour.

I flew for regional airlines for eight years, and then I got a job with a major carrier. The pay and

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benefits are better (major carriers pay more than twice as much as regionals) and there's better brand recognition. Every airline has their own program, separate from what you've already learned in flight school. It's usually six to eight weeks in a ground school simulator before you even get into one of their airplanes. It's identical to the real day-to-day life of the pilot, from the instruments we use to the cows and pastures we see out the window.

I have to get to the airport 45 minutes prior to departure for domestic flights, or an hour and a half for international flights. Once I get through the security line, I head to the flight planning room, where I meet with the other pilots on the trip to go over the flight plan. It's sort of like planning a road trip: We have a plotting chart where we map our route, we review the flight plan, and we go over any maintenance issues on the plane we're flying.

Planes have maintenance issues all the time. Most of the time, they get fixed before flight, but sometimes there isn't enough time to take care of very minor things, like a passenger seat with a broken seat back. So occasionally, we have to mark those minor maintenance issues as "deferred."

IT'S SO EXHILARATING TO FEEL THE PLANE PEELING AWAY FROM THE EARTH.

The first thing every pilot does in the cockpit is create a "nest," which basically means setting up the items you'll need for the flight. You stash away your luggage and unpack the essential items from your flight bag, like a headset for talking to air traffic control (ATC) and electronic flight charts. Then we start prepping the plane, entering data about our flight into the computer system, running through checklists, and finally, taxi out.

During takeoff, we get to "hand fly" the plane until we get up to cruise. Hand flying means flying the plane manually, and it's ridiculously fun. We love the feeling of flying a plane, just like a race car driver loves being behind the wheel of a car. It's so exhilarating to feel the plane peeling away from the earth, and to watch the ground become smaller beneath you. Once you reach a certain elevation, you can turn on autopilot, but if it's a clear, sunny day, you can usually hand fly the plane for a little longer. If weather conditions are bad or you need to focus on a maintenance issue, you can switch on autopilot sooner.

The autopilot is a computer system that maintains all the controls on the plane, sort of like cruise control on a car — except instead of just controlling speed, it's also controlling altitude, course, engine power, and so on. But you don't get to kick back when autopilot kicks in. You're still busy doing other things, like monitoring the controls and communicating with ATC. We're constantly talking to ATC to make sure the route ahead is clear; if there's weather or another plane in the way, they'll re-route us to a different course. Mechanical issues can pop up during the flight — it's rare, but it happens — and the only way you'll know is if you're paying attention and you see the alert. If there's ever a moment where you're doing nothing, it usually means you're forgetting something.

IF YOU DRINK A TON OF WATER WHILE YOU'RE IN FLIGHT, I PROMISE YOU WILL NEVER GET JET LAG.

The cockpit is pretty comfortable. The seats are ergonomically designed for comfort, which is a big upgrade from the passenger seats. Nearly every airplane you fly on will be super-drying, so I drink a ton of water to stay hydrated. If you drink a ton of water while you're in flight, I promise you will never get jet lag.

I know it can be super-annoying when you're delayed at the gate and the pilot won't tell you what's

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going on, so I try to be really communicative with my passengers. That said, if we're delayed, it usually means we're actively troubleshooting and we've got to handle that task, which might take 10 or 20 minutes before we can get on the PA to tell everyone what's going on.

Other than making announcements, I don't interact with passengers much. We're actually not supposed to leave the cockpit for safety reasons, unless we have to use the bathroom. Sometimes we have kids come up to the cockpit after the flight, which is really cute. We'll throw them in the seat and push some buttons that make noise for them. Most passengers are very polite when they de-plane, but most the time I'm too busy going over our post-flight checklist — completing the flight log, securing the aircraft, and making sure the cabin is clean for the next flight — to say good-bye to people when they exit the plane.

There are usually three pilots on international flights: one captain and two pilots with less seniority. Like any job, there are certain people I don't like working with, but I'd say 95 percent of the time I love my crew, and we end up meeting up for dinner or something during our layovers. During the flight, everyone gets a rest break. Depending on the airline, pilots either sleep in the lay-flat beds in first class or in private bunks next to the cockpit.

My schedule isn't consistent, but I typically work about a couple days on and then a couple days off. I love having variation in my schedule, but sometimes it's annoying when I feel like I really need a day off and I can't get one. Most of the time I do international trips, which I prefer because it's just one flight and then I'm done with work, instead of several [shorter] flights in one day. For international trips, there's generally a 24-hour layover between flights, so you get a micro-vacation. I always make it a goal to do something special while I'm in a foreign city, whether it's sampling the local cuisine or going sightseeing. But the first thing I do when I get in is sleep, because I've just stayed up all night flying.

When I think about it, I guess the job can get stressful, but I never feel stressed in the moment. The funny thing about flying is that you can get really nervous thinking, *Wow, there are all these people behind me.* But once you shut the cockpit door, you don't really ever think about the fact that you're carrying passengers. You just think about the tasks at hand. If there's an emergency and something needs to be resolved right away — like a mechanical issue, or getting around a big thunderstorm — I'm too busy solving the problem that's in front of me to feel stressed out.

Aviation is very safety-oriented and focused on wide safety margins. There's always a backup, and then a backup for the backup. I've had to train for disaster scenarios in the flight simulator, where your backup's backup fails, but in real life, I've only had a couple of serious mechanical problems, and we've always been able to deal with it.

I KNOW IT SOUNDS WEIRD, BUT I'M NEVER REALLY WORRIED ABOUT MY PASSENGERS' LIVES.

One time I was flying a quick, 45-minute-long flight, and when we began our descent, our landing gear wouldn't go down. We had to go back up and check various monitors to figure out what was causing the problem. It turned out we lost our hydraulics fluid, which does many things, including put your landing gear down. You can't add more hydraulics fluid once you're up in the air; once you're out, you're out. In that plane, we had an emergency gear extension we could use, so we used that to land, and everything worked out totally fine. I didn't even realize until after we'd landed that it had been a stressful thing to deal with.

I know it sounds weird, but I'm never really worried about my passengers' lives — I just focus on getting the plane where it needs to go. Turbulence isn't a big deal. It's basically just air bubbles in

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the sky, so it's uncomfortable, but not a threat. We try to avoid it when we can, but that's mostly for comfort, not because it's unsafe. Thunderstorms, on the other hand, are dangerous. We're supposed to avoid them by at least 20 miles, because severe thunderstorms can destroy the aircraft. You can't see lightning during the day, and sometimes thunderstorms are hidden in the clouds, so we use our weather radar to figure out if it's something we can fly through or if we need to fly around it.

It's kind of crazy to think back on how I might not have become a pilot. Only about 5 percent of airline pilots in the United States are women, and if I hadn't become a flight attendant, I'm not sure I would've imagined this as my career. But I love, love, love my job, and if I'd had a role model who told me, "You can do this," I'm sure I would've gone to flight school even sooner. Now, I try to be that kind of role model for other women through organizations like Women in Aviation and the International Society of Women Airline Pilots, both of which give scholarships for women to go into aviation careers. And I do think there are more women becoming airline pilots. I wasn't the only woman at my flight school, and I know so many other women pilots.

Sometimes I still can't believe that I get paid to fly around in the clouds. It's like the novelty of flying never wears off — it's exhilarating each time you take off on a new flight.

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