last stop

lessons of an AIRPORT PORTER

by **David Volk**

Illustration by
John Linton Roberson

I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it myself, but there it was: a fly on a leash.

Sort of.

A co-worker had pulled a hair from my scraggly Abe Lincoln–like beard, tied it around the leg of a fly and now had his very own pet. And it wasn't even Bring Your Pet to Work Day.

Welcome to a day in the life of an airport porter.

When I started this piece about my two years as a skycap, I hoped to share valuable lessons, but sometimes there aren't any. It just is what it is.

Like the time I checked a passenger's bag and asked him about his final destination and heard him say, "California."

Sir, I understand you're excited to be vacationing, fleeing the jurisdiction or attending the international Rock, Paper, Scissors tournament, but you have to be more specific if you want your bags to follow you. After all, there are at least 2,000 airports in California, all located in Los Angeles.

Nor can I forget the day I wrote a passenger's gate number on his ticket envelope, told him his gate number as I looked him in the eye and then asked if he had any questions.

"Yes," he replied. "What's my gate number?"

Who am I kidding? This happened every day.

Apparently air travel causes some people to take too much luggage and leave their brains behind.

Things were even weirder behind the scenes.

At one airline, the baggage handlers interpreted the word *Fragile* as French for *throw really hard*. At another, a merger left baggage handlers so bitter they took 30 minutes to transport suitcases to the baggage claim in the small airport where I worked. As a result, I waited a year for bags to come in when a flight arrived late on New Year's Eve.

The airport was also the only place people spontaneously evaporated. I discovered this phenomenon when I was sent to get passengers requesting wheelchair assistance. I had to wait until the plane emptied to get them and by then many had vanished. Either that or it was the most amazing faith healing on record ... and it happened every day.

The gratuities were great in winter, but not so during the summer when few traveled to Fort Myers, Fla., where I worked. To keep things fair, we had a rotation. After a porter got a load, he (or she) went to the end of the line. Consequently, only one porter had to stand out on the curb and face the humidity while everyone else relaxed in air-conditioned comfort. It wasn't unusual for one person to stand, leaning against their luggage carrier, for hours at a time.

That's when I discovered the only lesson I can offer after years in the field: It really is possible to fall asleep standing up. ❑

Humorist David Volk writes about travel, food and business. He can be reached at david@davidvolk.com. Check out his Web site at www.davidvolk.com. *He guarantees you'll laugh, or double your money back.*

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