

# How Disney Trips Helped Me Overcome My Fear of Flying: A Disney Parks Planning Article

by Amy Wear, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Air Canada gave me my first flight from Atlantic Canada to Toronto at age 16, as part of Canada's 125th birthday.

I was pretty neutral about flying again until the 1998 Swiss Air crash off Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia, about a 4-hour drive from my home. I watched too many gut-wrenching news stories and heard first-hand accounts while spending many weekends in Nova Scotia that year. As a result, despite having a strong faith, I developed a paralyzing fear of flying.

When I went away to graduate school the next year in Ontario, Canada, I left my boyfriend (now husband) back in Nova Scotia. Any visits with each other required one of us to fly. I would begin my conscious worrying effort about six weeks before he came to visit, catastrophizing about all the things that might go wrong. When it was my turn to fly to Halifax, my close friend can recall seeing me shaking when I got off the airplane.

□ I continued to be a nervous flier, taking my first trip to Disney over the Christmas holidays in 2000. My "worry timeline" was decreasing, but it's no surprise that September 11th, 2001 gave me a whole new set of air travel worries. I was sure that I'd never fly again.

□ Nothing like a honeymoon cruise to motivate me to face my biggest fear again in August of 2002, including stopovers at JFK Airport just shy of the first anniversary of that unspeakable day. We felt awfully close to the water when we touched down in New York City on the way home. Everyone broke out in applause and the captain apologized for the rough ride. Are you kidding me?!

Ironically, I was working as a mental health occupational therapist at the time and was well-versed in strategies for managing anxiety. It's quite another thing, however, to apply these strategies to your own life.

□ Just when I was starting to let go of my phobia, a flight home to New Brunswick in 2004 with a now defunct airline set me back. The captain announced that we were headed back to Toronto because, "we've lost one of the engines." The girl beside me (who I'd never met) and I held hands and cried for an agonizing 30 minutes. Not too many other

people seemed overly concerned, presumably because they knew that planes have four or five engines to spare. We had an uneventful landing and thankfully were sent on a different plane for a distressing 2-hour flight home.

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□I didn't contemplate flying for a few years after that until I wanted to bring my 4-month old daughter to visit my close friend and her new baby in Toronto. We excitedly made plans to get together and swap baby stories. I was all set to book my flight and then the late-night obsessing began. Suddenly I couldn't cope with the thought of something happening while traveling with my baby. A few days later, I called my friend and told her that I couldn't come after all. She gave my head a shake, saying, "You want to take your kids to Disney someday, right?" Yes. "Well, then you'd better start by making a short flight to Toronto!" So I did go after all. And we survived.

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□Eventually I decided to ask my doctor about a low-dose prescription for Ativan, solely for flying. She reassured me that countless people take Ativan to help with flying anxiety. Over time, all I needed was the reassurance that I had the medication with me.

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□My big challenge came when we took our two daughters to Disney for the first time. I allowed myself to get swept up in the planning and kept paranoid thoughts of plane crashes at bay. It was a big hurdle of courage to fly with my whole family from Maine to Orlando, but I kept my focus on the excitement of going to Disney.

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□I brought my Ativan with me, but I was too busy keeping the girls occupied to need it. I didn't want to pass on my fear of flying to them, so I made a conscious effort not to look concerned or talk about my fears.

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□That trip was the beginning of our love affair with Disney vacations and, ironically, eventually led me to become a travel agent. Several trips later, my desire to enjoy Disney vacations has exceeded my fear of flying.

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□I've also become more rational about the statistics on plane crashes. After a few white-knuckled winter drives to our favourite airport in Maine, I finally concede that it is safer to fly than it is to drive. I also don't watch the news anymore. When a tragedy does occur, I don't read every detail, protecting myself from spiraling back into that place of great fear.

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□My most recent leap of faith was a trip to Disneyland California. We chose to drive seven hours to fly from New Hampshire with our favourite - Southwest Airlines. Their flight crew always make us feel at

home. I especially love their little jokes to lighten the mood. I also welcomed the opportunity to fly into Orange County's John Wayne Airport, rather than take on the massive LAX. The six-hour flights to and from Anaheim were a breeze and we even caught glimpses of the Canadian Rockies and other jaw-dropping views from the air.

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□ Now that I know we can handle a longer flight, I have my sights set on Disney's Aulani in Hawaii or a European Disney cruise. If I'm being honest, I'll probably refill the Ativan prescription. In the meantime, I'll have faith and take the Soarin' Captain's advice to sit back, relax, and enjoy my flight!

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