

Underwire Alert!

By Patti Morrow
March 15, 2012



When traveling, always make sure your breasts are not lethal weapons.

Breasts? Lethal weapons?

Apparently the TSA thinks so.

It was 3:30 a.m. and I was on my way to a business trip from New Hampshire to Oregon. I'm not a morning person so I was already grumpy, having had to extract myself from warm, thick microfiber before dawn in order to catch a 6 a.m. flight. I was singularly focused on getting my hands on a cup of steaming black coffee.

Manchester Regional is a small airport. Due to the early hour, I left myself just enough time to get through security, get to my gate, and a few minutes to spare to "line up under my number." I'm a seasoned traveler; I know how to get through security fast. My black ballet flats slip on and off in seconds, and I can whip my laptop out as fast as any spaghetti western gun-slinger.

I even know what to wear. My black skinny jeans and black ribbed turtleneck – what I wistfully dub my "Catwoman outfit" – hide nothing and get me through in a breeze.

Liquid-free, I get in line for my invasive Fourth Amendment violation full body scan, which only serves to worsen my disposition. As luck would have it, the older woman in front of me is a novice. She has things in her pockets; she is holding her ticket, she faces the wrong direction. Back she goes, once, twice. The third time I do an eye roll so far back into my head I can see the person in back of me.

Oh goody, my turn. I'm confident in my Catwoman attire, so lickety-split, I step into the scanning booth, spread my legs and make Minnie Mouse ears with my hands before the TSA agent can utter a single instruction. He raises one eyebrow, smirks, and flips the switch. "Wait for the picture," he says, and then "Step here for a screening." Now a female TSA agent steps up and directs my eyes to the screen. "The scanner shows something. I'm going to have to pat down your breast area." "Are you kidding?" I say, livid that viewing my naked body on the scanner was not enough. "I can't imagine what that could possibly be!" She gives me an apologetic look. "It's probably just your underwire bra, ma'am."

I mentally considered my three choices: (1) make a scene and get arrested, just on principle, (2) ask for a private feel-up, or (3) submit and actually make it onto my plane. Since my purpose in Oregon was to testify at an important Senate hearing early the next morning, and knowing that there aren't an abundance of flights from New Hampshire to Oregon, I made the only choice possible. But I made sure I gave her my surliest, squinty-eyed, disgusted look – the one I usually save for my kids when they are misbehaving in church.

The enhanced pat-down wasn't terribly invasive, but still infuriating. No right-minded person would ever mistake an (insert cough here) over-40 woman sporting a long blond ponytail for a terrorist. And no terrorist would ever waste his time or effort on a flight between New Hampshire and Oregon. No statement to be made there.

I acknowledge that this might be TMI (too much information), but I like nice undergarments. My mother's voice saying, "what if you are in a car accident" is seared into my subconscious. I don't do the "uniboob" sports bra thing, nope, not even at the gym. I've been wearing underwire bras for decades, and with no harm to the public. I travel a lot, so why haven't I set off this alarm before? Well, apparently some underwire bras are partially made with a type of hard plastic, not to mention that TSA employees at different airports will handle these alerts in different ways – you may get a wave-through, or you may get a harder-liner.

I know, inquiring minds want to know... what did I do on my flight back? I went "without." Not a good look for me, though, all things considered.

Next week I'm flying to Washington, DC. Now what? This is madness!

Maybe I should contact the ACLU...

Or maybe I should just take my bra off, under my shirt, and put it on the conveyor belt next to my shoes...

There's no law against that. Not yet, anyway.