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Island Life

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Posted on: Thursday, November 30, 2006

Best foods to eat while flying high

By Charles Stuart Platkin

It's been almost six years since I did an airline food investigation, and much has changed. No longer are airlines serving those high-calorie, tasteless meals that had up to 1,500 calories. Now they are serving prepackaged snacks and sandwiches, and some are even offering healthy selections. Here are the offerings and ratings (Health Score: 5 stars is the highest rate, 1 star is the lowest rating):

UNITED AIRLINES

Cooperation in providing nutritional information: Very helpful.

Health score: 5 stars. United has the most variety and the most healthful choices. The Smartpack is trans-fat-free and "vegetarian-friendly."

Best bet: Go for the Ritebite or the Smartpack (if you're sharing).

Calories: 895 (Smartpack), 550 (Minimeal), 650 (Quickpick), 580 (Ritebite).

Exercise equivalent (amount of walking to burn off the calories): 231 minutes (Smartpack); 142 minutes (Minimeal); 168 minutes (Quickpick); 149 minutes (Ritebite).

Cost: \$5 per box.

CHOICES:

SMARTPACK

- SunGold Creamy SunButter (1.5 ounces, 266 calories) Bear Naked All-Natural Fruit and Nut

EATING ON THE GO

Bring your own snacks: Even if you ate before you left home, you are still going to get hungry. We often underestimate the amount of time a trip can take. A two-hour flight could mean four or five hours of travel.

What to bring:

- Water: Buy it after the security checkpoint to take onboard. Dehydration can cause or exacerbate hunger, jet lag and fatigue. Cereal: Kashi or Cheerios are portable, low-calorie choices. Beef jerky: Especially if you're a low-carb fan but not if you're watching your sodium. Fruit: Apples, pears and grapes are durable, and most fruit can be kept in a container. Rice cakes: Be selective, since calorie and fat content vary widely. Energy bars: Although they tend to be high in calories and fat, they often are better than a slice of pizza or a candy bar. Nonfat yogurt: Yogurt is a great portable snack (although it is perishable). You can pack a 3-ounce container or less in an insulated bag or take a small cooler, but understand that this can be counted against carry-on bag limitations. Sandwiches: Pre-cut them into portion-controlled sections so you can pull them out at different times during the trip without making a mess. Chicken, turkey, cold cuts and cheese (on 100 percent whole-wheat bread) are all great options for

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Granola (1/2 cup, 280 calories)

- Vermont Village Cannery Organic Peach Applesauce (4 ounces, 80 calories)

- Glacier Ridge Farms White Cheddar Cheese (0.75 ounces, 50 calories)

- Pita Shack Multigrain & Honey Lavash crackers (0.9 ounces, 120 calories)

- Hero Strawberry Preserves (64 calories)

- Bali's Best Latte Candy (1 candy, 15 calories)

- Emer'gen-C Fizzing Drink Mix - Tangerine (1 packet, 20 calories)

MINIMEAL

- Hormel hard salami slices (1 ounce, 110 calories)

- Rondelé Peppercorn Parmesan cheese spread (1 ounce, 70 calories)

- Venus wheat crackers (1 package, 60 calories)

- Mott's Healthy Harvest Granny Smith applesauce, unsweetened (1 cup, 50 calories)

- Kettle Classics natural potato chips (1 ounce, 150 calories)

- Pepperidge Farm Milano cookies (2 cookies, 120 calories)

QUICKPICK

- Jack Link's hickory-smoked beef jerky (1 ounce, 60 calories)

- Just the Cheese Baked Cheddar Cheese Snacks (1/2 ounce, 75 calories)

- Stoned Classics all-natural blue tortilla chips (180 calories)

- La Victoria Thick'n Chunky salsa (15 calories)

- SunRise honey coated trail mix (2 ounces, 206 calories)

- Pepperidge Farm Milano cookies (2 cookies, 120 calories)

RITEBITE

- Bumblebee Sensations Lemon & Pepper Seasoned Tuna Medley (3 ounces, 110 calories)

- Late July Organic Crackers (1 package, 100 calories)

- Wild Garden Hummus (1 jar, 73.5 calories)

- Stacy's Multigrain Baked Pita Chips (1 ounce, 130 calories)

- Fino Selections Gouda cheese (1 ounce, 101 calories)

- Newman's Own organic California raisins (0.5 ounces, 45.5 calories)

- Mini-Toblerone (12.5-gram bar, 66.5 calories)

sandwiches on the go.

- Soy chips: Another portable, low-cal, high-fiber snack.

- Check with the Transportation Security Administration for the latest in-flight rules on bringing food and water: www.tsa.gov.

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CONTINENTAL AIRLINES

Cooperation in providing nutritional information: Very helpful.

Health score: 4 stars. Not much variety, but low-calorie, high-impact meals.

Best bet: Both sandwiches are fine; the light mayo is a nice touch.

Calories: 285 (turkey), 316 (ham).

Exercise equivalent (amount of walking to burn off the calories): 73 minutes (turkey); 81 minutes (ham); 21 minutes (peanuts); 13 minutes (pretzels).

Cost: No charge.

CHOICES:

Flights over two hours:

- Turkey sandwich (170 calories, including packet of Hellmann's light mayo) or ham sandwich (201 calories, with packet of French's yellow mustard)
- Carrots (35 calories)
- Fun-size candy bar (80 calories)

Flights under two hours:

- Honey-roasted peanuts (1.5 ounces, 80 calories)
- Mini pretzels (1.5 ounces, 50 calories)

AMERICAN AIRLINES

Cooperation in providing nutritional information: Helpful.

Health score: 3 1/2 stars. The meat, nuts, raisins and cheese in the snack pack have enough protein and fat to satisfy you.

Best bet: Skip the breakfast muffin unless you have nothing else (but split it with your seatmate). If you buy the snack pack, get rid of the cookies and the Goldfish.

Calories: 710 (snack pack) 440/420 (breakfast muffin).

Exercise equivalent (amount of walking to burn off the calories): 183 minutes (snack pack), 108 minutes (blueberry muffin); 113 minutes (chocolate muffin)

Cost: \$4 snack box; \$2 muffin.

CHOICES:**SNACK BOX**

- Pepperidge Farm Goldfish (0.75 ounces 100 calories)
- O'Brien's Cured Meat (32 grams, 110 calories)
- Lorna Doone Cookies (2 cookies 140 calories)
- Kings Raisins (28 grams, 90 calories)

- Carr's Table Water Crackers (7.5 grams, 2 crackers, 30 calories)
- Le Petit Fromage Cheese Spread (0.75 ounces, 70 calories)
- Emerald Deluxe Mixed Nuts (1 ounce, 170 calories)

BREAKFAST SNACK

Otis Spunkmeyer Muffin (4-ounce chocolate muffin, 440 calories; blueberry, 420 calories)

US AIRWAYS

Cooperation in providing nutritional information: Not helpful.

Health score: 2 stars. Not much variety and not much in terms of nutritional value. The snack pack is offered on flights of 2 1/2 hours or longer.

Best bet: Eat the fruit and nut mix and the cheese; skip the crackers and cookies.

Calories: 470 (snack pack).

Exercise equivalent (amount of walking to burn off the calories): 121 minutes.

Cost: \$3 per snack pack.

CHOICES:

SNACK PACK

- Azar Fruit and Nut Mix (1 ounce, 110 calories)
- Famous Amos Chocolate Chip Cookies (4 cookies, 150 calories)
- Austin Cheese Crackers with Cheddar Cheese. (1.38 ounces, 210 calories)

DELTA AIR LINES

Cooperation in providing nutritional information: Extremely unhelpful. Provided no information — probably why they're in bankruptcy.

Health score: 1 star. You'll be very hungry even after eating Delta's entire snack pack.

Best bet: Keep the granola bar and the peanuts; dump the rest.

Calories: 766.

Exercise equivalent (amount of walking to burn off the calories): 197 minutes.

Cost: \$5 per box.

CHOICES:

SNACK BASKET

- Frito-Lay SunChips (1-ounce bag, 140 calories)
- Quaker Granola Bars (1-ounce bar, 120 calories)
- Dry-roasted peanuts (1 ounce, 30 nuts, 170 calories)

- Biscoff Cookies (5 cookies, 146 calories)
- Lance Honey Peanut Butter Crackers (1 package, 190 calories)

Charles Stuart Platkin is a nutrition and public-health advocate, and author of the upcoming "The Diet Detective's Count Down" (Simon & Schuster, 2007).

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