

# I worked in a charity shop — trust me, it’s a really dirty business

## Carol Midgley

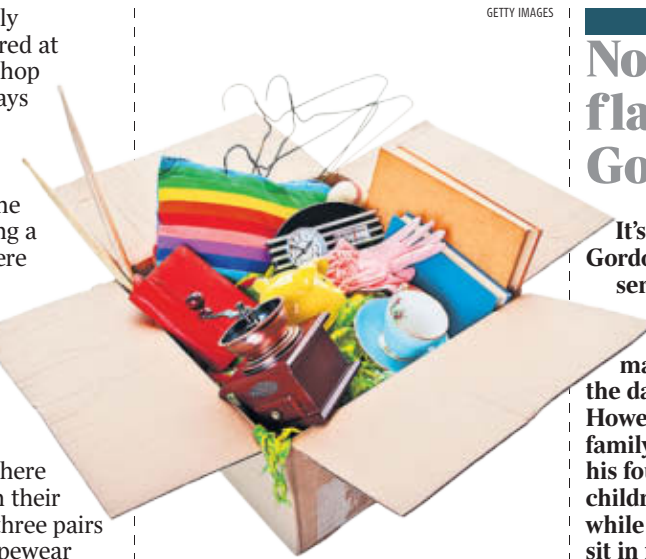
Until recently I volunteered at a charity shop on Saturdays (virtue signalling, moi?) and it taught me a great deal. If you are selling a jug for 50p, for example, there will still be customers who try to barter you down as if in a Marrakesh souk: “I would take it for 40p, love, but 50? I’d be a fool.”

However, I’d never quite realised how many people there are in the world who’ll open their underwear drawer, behold three pairs of stained and perished shapewear knickers in dishwater grey and say to themselves: “Ah, yes. Someone will be glad of those. I’ll pop them in the charity bag. Good for me!”

This being Holy Week, and the time when experts exhort us to spring-clean our wardrobes along with our souls, I’d say that if you’re thinking of donating any unwanted clothes please remember, for the love of God, that no one will ever want your unsightly gussets. Those whose job it is to unpack this ghastly haul do not do so with thankfulness in their hearts. I have knelt in the back of the shop, half gagging with disgust, half creased up with laughter, sorting out garments that you wouldn’t use to scrub your toilet floor. It’s remarkable how low some people think the charity bar is. I’m talking babies’ bibs still heavily encrusted with food. Tatty bras with underarm sweat stains. Men’s plucked and bobbled trousers with a lingering “toilet aroma”. Sweaters laced with holes. A solitary slipper — why? Why? Sometimes I’d don gloves, so unappealing was the task.

This is not to say that a great many lovely people don’t donate top-notch goods that are hugely appreciated and are what keep these places afloat, but others seem to see charity shops as a handy dumping ground for stuff they can’t be bothered to take to the tip, all under the guise of beneficence.

Staff at Sue Ryder shops in Oxfordshire had to plead with locals not to leave tat such as broken microwaves and bed frames outside on the pavement after working hours.



GETTY IMAGES

## Not so flash Gordon

It’s hard to take Gordon Ramsay seriously now he has that pouffy hairedo that makes him look like the dad of Jedward. However, the Ramsay family rule — that his four teenage children fly economy while he and his wife sit in first-class — is very wise.

“I turn left with Tana and they turn right and I say to the chief stewardess, ‘Make sure those little f\*\*\*ers don’t come anywhere near us...’ I’ve worked my f\*\*\*ing arse off to sit that close to the pilot and you appreciate it more when you’ve grafted for it,” he said.

So true. You’d also be ruining flying for them for life. Where is there to go after the left turn and the welcome bowl of nuts? A crusty Easyjet tray-table and a belching stag party? Bravo too for saying that he won’t be leaving them his millions, but only a 25 per cent deposit on a flat. If you erase a child’s ambition with instant wealth, pretty soon they’ll be taking drugs, starring in a viral sex tape or, worse, a crap reality TV show. No one deserves that fate.

## Mum’s gone to Iceland

When I heard about the new “vagina ice pops” my first thought was: “Well, quite embarrassing to eat on the bus, but people are more broadminded these days.”

It turns out though that these are not ice pops in the shape of

lady flowers at all, but devices to take the sting out of post-partum pain. Put simply they are condoms filled with water, frozen then applied by the woman to soothe her poor shredded and bruised parts. Excellent idea.

If you do have older kids though, please avoid storing your vagina ice pops in the freezer next to the Calippos to avoid confusion. However understanding your guests may be, that would be an awkward one to explain.

# Brace! Brace!

## A video of a man being dragged from a flight has exposed the murky practice of overbooking, says Tom Chesshyre

Atlanta International Airport at 7pm on a Monday night — and mayhem rules. Crowds have gathered by the boarding gate and are waving tickets at dead-eyed staff.

The staff refuse to be rushed and I watch, thinking: “I’m fine, I’ve got a ticket... what’s up with these people?” About 20 minutes before take-off, I go over to see what’s happening. Word has got out that the flight is overbooked and people are being “bumped” off on to flights the next day. And I’m on that list. A few frantic minutes of pleading ensue amid the ticket-wavers, some of whom appear to be pros at this — cutting canny deals for travel vouchers.

Eventually, with five minutes to spare, one of the airline’s cabin crew takes pity on me. My original boarding ticket is torn up and I’m given another scrawled out by hand.

I hurry to the aircraft and enter as the door is being closed. I’m the final passenger on a packed jumbo, sitting on the last seat in economy. Phew!

Catching a flight in the US is increasingly a test of nerves, thanks to the now commonplace policy of overbooking. This can cause bun-fights at boarding gates, where compensation of up to \$1,350 can be offered. The experience of being forcibly removed by security officers — as in the case of the doctor travelling from O’Hare International Airport in Chicago to Louisville on United Airlines this week — is rare because most negotiations are handled inside terminals.

Yet when it is discovered at the last moment that a flight has too many passengers, the captain has the legal power to eject paying customers. In this instance, an announcement had been made over the aircraft’s speaker system that an extra four seats were required for four United cabin crew, who were needed in Louisville the next morning. Only two people put their hands up for the \$800 compensation, which had been doubled at the last minute from \$400. A member of the cabin crew then made a further announcement that, because not enough passengers had volunteered, others would be selected randomly by computer.

The doctor, named by the Louisville *Courier-Journal* as 69-year-old David Dao, was picked. Images taken on phones show him being pulled along the aisle by security staff with his jumper rolling up his chest as it rubs against the carpet. “I want to go home! I want to go home!” he says. A female fellow passenger looks on open-mouthed and says: “My God, what are you doing? No! This is wrong!” He is bleeding from a cut to his mouth by the time he is hauled to the exit.

These clips went global, and have been seen by millions — a PR disaster for the airline, which was not helped

when United’s chief executive, Oscar Munoz, issued a bland statement saying that his staff were “having to re-accommodate these customers”. He added that the airline would be “reaching out” to “resolve the situation” involving the man.

Bumping off is the inevitable consequence of airlines’ decisions to overbook flights to ensure seats are always filled; compensation payments are just part of their business model. In the US last year 434,000 passengers stepped aside (enough people to fill 781 super jumbos) to take a later flight on the country’s largest dozen airlines, the vast majority choosing to do so. A more casual approach to catching flights is now well ingrained across the Pond. More than 63,000 were bumped off United Airlines, while about 130,000 experienced a “bumping” on Delta Air Lines, the carrier with the most overbooking cases.

In the UK in 2015 the Civil Aviation Authority estimates that 50,330 travellers across all airlines were denied boarding: this is fewer than 0.02 per cent of passengers flying in and out of the country (the corresponding figure in the US is 0.62 per cent). Again, most do so out of choice, enticed by the offer of compensation. With flights full, airline

## “Catching a flight in the US is increasingly a test of nerves

staff are keen to dish out vouchers; they would rather do this than face possible fines for compensation under European Union regulations — EU regulation 261, to be precise.

Repeated fines would not be good for the corporate image. Anyway, airlines know that there are usually enough students on board to guarantee a few hands shooting up, even when the compensation on offer is quite low.

One difference between the US and the UK is that there is less yelling over speakers about the latest cash compensation or voucher offer, which can sound a bit like a cattle auction: “\$300, any takers for \$300... OK, we’re offering \$400... what, still no takers? \$450!” The brazen American approach has yet to hit our shores, where offers are usually made quietly at the counter.

In-the-know travellers who choose to play the bumping game are full of cunning wheezes — and hard-nosed regular business travellers lead the way. *Businessinsider.com* recommends getting to the boarding gate early to inform agents that you are willing to be bumped, sitting close to the desk to be in front of others when a call for volunteers is made, travelling with

# They’re after your seat



GALLERY STOCK



Left: David Dao was left bleeding from the mouth after being dragged along the aisle

only hand luggage (as pulling out checked-in bags takes time), holding out when dealing with the boarding staff to push up compensation — and asking for payment in cash, which many airlines will consider.

There can be a subtle alternative to the Del Boy approach. One regular business traveller between Singapore and London, who asked not to be named, said that he will always ask to be put on the “space available upgrade list”. As he always travels in the premium economy cabin, often at the end of the day — when flights are likely to be fullest — he knows that there is a good chance that passengers travelling economy will be “bumped up” to premium economy, whereupon he will, in turn, be bumped to first class. “Bumping can be a very good thing,” he said.

Then again, if you really do not want to be bumped and it appears as though you are about to be, the best approach, insiders say, is to claim that you are attending a wedding, funeral

or job interview. It’s more likely that someone with a less pressing reason for travel will be bumped.

There is another side to the murky world of plane bumping. It is possible with some low-cost carriers such as Easyjet to be bumped on to an earlier flight. This scenario is possible when passengers in a hurry to reach their destination turn up early for flights and offer to go on an earlier scheduled service. If the airline has space on board, it could be in its interest to allow such a switch because it frees up seats on the later flight.

Bumping seems likely to become more widespread as airlines continue to cut costs and budget flights spread across the globe. In America they’re ahead of us. Catching a plane these days is like taking a bus. Book a ticket, turn up at the airport and you could be in the air half an hour later (if you haven’t been bumped). It’s only a matter of time before the full delights — and intricacies — of bumping reach our airport terminals.

## Overbooking — the rules

You have to be incredibly unlucky to be bumped off a flight in Europe, but overbooking is a practice that airlines operate in the UK. Unlike in the US — where staff at the boarding gate make general announcements offering passengers cash to be bumped to the next flight — British airlines are more likely to ask individuals at check-in or at the gate whether they will fly later. Some airlines operate a “call for volunteers” policy whereby they aim to phone passengers earmarked to be bumped before they leave for the airport.

There are strict EU rules that apply to all flights departing from airports within the European Union, but passenger rights differ depending on whether you voluntarily agree to be bumped, or are forced to fly later.

### Voluntary bumping

If you are cash-poor and time-rich, agreeing to be voluntarily bumped can be a lucrative game. There is no statutory compensation for this, it is for you and the airline to agree. Airlines will often offer far more cash than EU rules dictate for involuntary bumping. Most will offer vouchers in the first instance. Reject these and settle only for cold, hard cash. The going rate is about £450, but there have been reports of airlines offering as much as £2,000 — in addition to food and, if overnight, a hotel. It is also worth trying to lag an upgrade.

### Involuntary bumping

If too few people volunteer, the airline is entitled to deny passengers boarding, but it must follow the EU rules. For short-haul flights, with a delay of less than two hours, you are entitled to €125 (£105), or €250 if longer than two hours. Long-haul compensation, for flights over 1,500km, is €200 for less than three hours’ delay or €400 for longer. This rises again for flights over 3,500km — extra long-haul — to €300 for less than four hours, and €600 for longer delays.

### The US rules

In the US, overbooking is a common practice, and federal rules dictate compensation. To attract volunteers, airlines will often make several calls at the gate, raising the stakes from as little as \$100 (£80) to more than \$1,350.

If that fails they bump passengers against their will. If an airline is able to rebook someone and deliver them at their destination within an hour of their planned arrival time, no compensation is required. If the new arrival time is between one and two hours later (or between one and four for international routes), the airline must compensate twice the amount of the one-way fare, up to \$675. If the delay is more than two hours, or four hours for international, the rate is four times the one-way fare, up to \$1,350. Airlines usually bump passengers flying on the cheapest tickets first. **Ben Clatworthy**

## The lowdown

## The Queen’s foot double

Why do new shoes always hurt? They don’t if you’re the Queen.

Already this conversation is veering away from what I imagined. I thought we were going to talk about Blisteze. What’s the Queen got to do with it?

Her shoes never hurt because...

... she has a personal Blisteze butler?

Stop interrupting me. No. Somewhere in the bowels of the Palace there is a person whose job it is to wear in the Queen’s shoes.

What does this lucky shoe person do?

Every time the Queen buys a pair of new shoes, she has to put on a pair of beige ankle socks...

Why beige?

STOP INTERRUPTING ME. And wear the shoes around the Palace, until they’re broken in. And she has to keep strictly to carpeted areas.

Why?

No idea. It’s the weirdest job requirement I’ve ever heard of.

So where does Her Majesty get her shoes from? Shoe Zone?

A firm called Anello & Davide. They specialise in theatrical and dance shoes.

Yes, I can imagine that Her Majesty likes to have a little song and dance routine up her sleeve, to put people at their ease.

I’m ignoring you now. Hers are black patent with a low heel and cost £1,000.

[chokes] A grand?

Why the fuss? You regularly spend half that in Manolo Blahnik.

Well, yes. But a grand’s a grand and mine are comfortable. I don’t have to pay someone to wear them in. And if she’s paying that much, then her shoes are bespoke. Every millimetre of the regal foot will have been mapped and measured. Her shoes should be like a second skin.

And yet apparently they’re not.

If they’re so uncomfortable, why does she keep buying them? Easy. Because she’s a woman.

Hilary Rose

