PASSENGER SHOCKS CREW BY OPENING AEROPLANE DOOR MOMENTS BEFORE TAKE-OFF

News / Airlines

A passenger delayed a flight by an hour by opening an emergency exit of a Boeing 737 just before take-off.

He was on a domestic flight with China Southern Airlines when the incident occurred, the People's Daily Online reports.

The plane had to stay at Chengdu Shuangliu airport while the issue was resolved.

The flight, bound for Urumqi, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in north-west China, was delayed for an hour as crew closed the door of the plane and waited for a new departure slot.

When questioned by crew, the unnamed man explained he "just wanted some air" before the plane took flight.

He complained that where he was sitting was too stuffy.

The Boeing 737 was originally meant to take off at 9:55am but because of the disruption, it ended up departing at 10:52am.

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The flight, CZ3693, from Chengdu to Urumqi Diwopu International Airport, lasts three and a half hours.

According to a spokesperson from the airport, the Boeing 737 was near the security gate with 130 passengers onboard.

Once the door was open, airport staff shut the door from the outside and re-examined the plane.

This caused the flight to be delayed while it was checked and they waited for a new departure slott.

China's Civil Aviation Law states those that cause theft or deliberate destruction, endangering flight safety and causing serious consequences can be held criminally liable.

What happens if you open an aeroplane door during a flight?

Luckily, this didn't happen while the plane was in flight - but what would happen if it was opened in-flight?

Oliver Smith from our travel team has the answers.

He reported: Should someone actually manage to open the door of a large passenger aircraft at high altitude, the cabin would lose pressure – extremely rapidly – and chaos would ensue.

Even instances of slow decompression, of which there are an estimated 40 to 50 a year, can be fatal. In 2005 a Boeing 737 operated by Helios Airways crashed, killing all 121 passengers and crew (the deadliest air disaster in Greek history), after a gradual loss of cabin pressure. The lack of oxygen at 30,000 feet left the crew incapacitated, and the plane – on auto-pilot – slowly ran out of fuel, before plunging to the ground.

In such instances, oxygen masks (with enough oxygen to last several minutes) should drop from the ceiling to stave off hypoxia (a lack of oxygen, which leads to sluggish thinking, dimmed visions, unconsiousness and then death). In the cockpit, the flight crew will don their rubber masks and begin a rapid descent to a safe altitude – anything below 10,000ft (mountainous obstacles notwithstanding).

Sudden decompression, which would occur if a plane door was suddenly thrust open, is another matter. Anyone standing near the exit would be ejected into the sky; the cabin temperature would quickly plummet to frostbite-inducing levels, and the plane itself might even begin to break apart. In 1988, an Aloha Airlines flight (also a Boeing 737) with 90 people on board was en route to Honolulu, cruising at an altitude of 24,000 feet, when a small section of the roof ruptured.

The resulting “explosive” decompression tore off a larger section of the roof, and a 57-year-old flight attendant called Clarabelle Lansing was swept from her seat and out of the hole in the aircraft. Luckily, all other passengers were belted up, and the pilot managed to land 13 minutes later, avoiding further loss of life. Dozens of other examples of explosive decompression have been recorded, and it often doesn’t end well.

Fortunately, while decompression can be dangerous, it is not going to happen because a fellow flier fancied a bit of fresh air for one simple reason: it is simply impossible to open a plane door during a flight.

“Cabin pressure won’t allow it,” explains Patrick Smith, an airline pilot and author of Cockpit

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Confidential, a book about air travel. “Think of an aircraft door as a drain plug, fixed in place by the interior pressure. Almost all aircraft exits open inward. Some retract upward into the ceiling; others swing outward; but they open inward first.

“At a typical cruising altitude, up to eight pounds of pressure are pushing against every square inch of interior fuselage. That’s over 1,100 pounds against each square foot of door.”

But there has been at least one incident when a passenger did manage to open the door of an aircraft while it was in the sky. In 1971 “Dan Cooper” hijacked a Boeing 727, extorted a $200,000 ransom, and then leapt from the rear exit with a parachute, never to be seen again. However, he had the pilot depressurise the plane in order to do so, while a year later “Cooper vanes” were installed to completely disable aircraft doors while the landing gear is up.

Incidentally, the reason skydivers or military personnel can regularly leap from aircraft doors is because those planes are not pressurised.

On the ground, however, the situation changes — as one would hope, with the possibility of an evacuation in mind.

Smith explains: “While the plane is taxiing, you will get the door to open. You will also activate the door’s emergency escape slide. As an aircraft approaches the gate, you will sometimes hear the cabin crew calling out ‘doors to manual’. This has to do with overriding the automatic deployment function of the slides. Those slides can unfurl with enough force to kill a person, and you don’t want them billowing onto the jet bridge or into a catering truck.”

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