



in airports

— Jon Watson looks at alternative accommodation

I'VE heard tales of business travellers who make a point of over-nighting only on aircraft or at airports but these stories are always told third or 30th hand...I've never met such a person. Many of us do notch up more than a few nights a year aloft and the foibles of weather, engineering, industrial action or terror scares occasionally do force an unwanted airport sojourn.

But doing it as a habit on business trips? I don't think so.

There are a few eccentrics who virtually live in airports. There was the hermit of Charles de Gaulle International in Paris who became something of a cult figure for years. I thought of him when one of the CDG terminals took a tumble.

CDG was once my home for a night and part of two days thanks to a bizarre sequence of events: an aircraft glitch followed by heavy fog and, then, just as the fog was thinning, a decision by the airline's cabin crew to go on strike after an acrimonious union meeting. The airline was uncommunicative, the snack bar closed up for the night and the bar didn't open at all.

It was not a great night but a spirit of shared misery turned into a certain camaraderie. In the small hours our aircraft's crew decided it would be a good idea to pretend they didn't know about the strike until they got to Tahiti, on the basis that the sunny beach in Tahiti was 100 per cent better than the foggy banlieue of Paris.

Good call, mes enfants. The captive audience clapped when this decision was delivered by the flight service director with typical Gallic gestures.

Other airport over-nights were similarly unplanned and did not involve much sleeping, largely because the circumstances meant I was (a) hoping we would be leaving soon and (b) scared witless that I'd be overlooked, curled snugly in a corner, which would then double the problem.

But there are, it seems, quite a lot of people who actually plan to sleep in airports. Some of them do it just one night here or there, usually when flying out the next day or having got in rather late; it's for convenience as well as the budget.

But there's a hard core who do it regularly and have made it rather an art.

They share their experiences on a dedicated website — www.sleepinginairports.com — and rate airports by their amenities as well as the attitude of security and other staff.

The annual wash-up (something that's difficult to come by in the lesser airports of the world but a luxury in some gems) put Singapore's Changi at the top of the list, a familiar spot for the airport described by the website's editor and originator Donna McSherry as "Club Changi". Runners-up — in alphabetical order — were Auckland, Brisbane, Hong Kong, Lima, Melbourne, Pittsburgh, Portland, Toronto (Terminal 3) and Vancouver.

Worst was Port Moresby, with most Indian airports getting a dishonourable mention.

The annual "porcelain goddess" awards went to Changi, London Heathrow and Hong Kong while the "poopy bathroom" awards were taken by Cairo, Addis Ababa, Wichita and Tripoli. Cairo was also tops for the "creepy crawler" awards, followed by Moscow Sheremetyevo and Paris CDG.

Other recognition is given for the friendliest security guards, airports for the religious, airports for gambling enthusiasts ("if saving money on a hotel room and blowing it all in the airport casino is what you prefer to do"), kid-friendly airports, airports for fitness enthusiasts, airports with sleep rooms and airports with showers.

There's a wealth of good advice, such as the best times of year to camp out in various airports and what to wear (plenty of warm clothing, mostly).

There's even a new service with recent headlines such as "Saudi divorces wife at airport" (he did so because his wife insisted on waiting there for a flight that was delayed 14 hours) and "Woman Says Airport Screener Spilled Loved One's Ashes" (in Seattle and — surprise, surprise — she's suing for mega-dollars).

McSherry, a young Canadian who has turned her budget travel leanings into a vibrant small business, set up the website in 1996 and also runs an organisation called Cheap Like Me Travel Society. The website came about largely by accident — she had time on her hands and was learning website design. She wasn't expecting much of a response and certainly not an ongoing flood of public submissions.

ON THE WEB: www.sleepinginairports.com

• *If you want to tell Jon Watson you make a habit of sleeping in airports, email him at jonwatson@asia.com*