

# Swissair

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When I was a student in university, I used to work in Geneva Airport, aka GVA, as a part-time luggage handling employee, an “auxiliaire” as we were called, in a now extinct company once called Swissair.

The job consisted mostly of waiting for the airplanes to park near the gate, open the cargo bays, offload whatever there was inside them, and reload them with more luggage, cargo boxes and mail bags. After that, we would close the cargo bays and stay clear of the engine ranges until the plane left the gate. Rinse and repeat. That was my routine, 4 hours a day, 3 to 5 days a week, from August 1995 until December 1997.

Let's be frank; as a whole, this job sucked big time, the pay wasn't very good (20 Swiss Francs per hour, 25 after 10pm and on Sundays; I let you do the math), and there were many health risks. Then how on Earth could I stand for so long the blithering cold of Swiss winters, the endless humming of the reactors, the kerosene-filled atmosphere, or the killing summer sun reflected on the concrete of the tarmac, for hours and hours?

There were some good reasons:

- Because I loved aeronautics, and for me, being close to the landing gear of a Jumbo Jet or an Airbus A-400 was an out-of-this-planet experience. I still remember the first time I saw such a beast approaching.
- Because you could renegotiate your working hours every month with great flexibility, which is perfect when you are studying.
- Because it was an endless source of both funny and tragic anecdotes, many of which I keep telling to my friends to this day, and which would fill a whole blog by themselves.
- And, last but not least, because you could travel all over the world, wherever Swissair went (that was an awful lot of places back then, including my beloved Buenos Aires) with a **tremendous discount**.

And I mean tremendous; I could have a return ticket GVA - EZE in Economy class for around 180 Swiss Francs. You read correctly; after a certain amount of hours (300, if I remember well, which meant between 4 to 6 months of work in my case), you would get a special employee voucher, of which you could trade

one for a discounted European ticket, and two of them for a transcontinental return flight.

The catch (there's always a catch) was that your ticket was of the "absolute-low-priority-you-might-not-fly-at-all-you've-been-warned" kind, and there was always the risk of not getting into the plane because it was full; thankfully, that never happened to me. But, to compensate, if Economy was full, you could get promoted to Business class (which actually did happen to me once: a great flight from Buenos Aires to Zurich in Business class, never to be forgotten!)

All in all, I went 4 times to Buenos Aires in one year, for less than what you pay for a single flight to the same place. All while getting a relatively decent living every month (for a cheap student at least). Not bad, and definitely worth the hassle of smog, rain, snow, heat, pains in the back, and overall organizational chaos that reigned in Swissair back then.

Because the thing is that, internally, Swissair was a complete mess.

Actually I was not surprised when I learnt that the company had gone the way of the dodo a few years after I left (and no, don't tell me it was a because of the cheap tickets to Argentina!). During my time there, the airline industry was undergoing a tremendous amount of change, and still, the management was pathetically convinced that people would still pay premium tickets for an EasyJet-level quality of service (Swissair tickets were extremely expensive back then). Middle and top managers started getting into the rotten habit of paying themselves huge bonuses while at the same time downsizing the staff. Employees' salaries and benefits were gradually reduced and suppressed, security measures were skipped, everyone was treated like shit.

The SAirGroup came and went. Many reorganizations made the headlines. In Crossair (Swissair's little sister company, serving short-range destinations), pilots were loudly complaining of earning around 3000 Swiss Francs per month (a relatively low salary by any standard in Switzerland), when some of their Swissair peers were getting much more, up to 6 times (!) that amount, basically doing the same job. One day, Swissair moved most of its intercontinental flights from Geneva to Zurich, and the direction of the GVA airport sold most of its Swissair stock right after that decision was taken. It was during that time that EasyJet came into the scene, and benefited enormously of all this mayhem.

For those who remember, Swissair during the '90s was more a source of national embarrassment rather than pride. And to top it off, the catastrophe of the JFK-GVA flight 111 in 1998 did not help.

In our luggage handling service, which later was spun off into a company (IMHO clumsily) named "Swissport" (French-speaking workers would rename it to the French equivalent of "Swiss pork"), the uncannily shortsighted view of the management saw hiring more and more "auxiliaires" (like myself) as the perfect way to increase shareholder value (or some other MBA crap like that); lots of my friends did work there at the time, but the truth is, we never cared about a

company that saw us (and treated us) as a commodity to be replaced at any time. As soon as we could, we took off (pun intended) for a nicer workplace or, like me, for another country altogether (my last flight on a Swissair aircraft was in January 1998, when I returned to live in Argentina; I never used the return ticket then).

Their long term employees were seen as a liability, instead of an asset. Everybody resented that.

In the end, it looked to us as if lots of powerful people wanted to destroy the company on purpose, an explanation that, even if looking like a conspiracy theory, is believed by many of my old colleagues. Since leaving I met several of them, some of which used to do this job full time; many have quite a few health problems now, the lesser of which are recurrent back or joint pains; frankly, just by breathing that shitty airport smog you could get very ill, very quickly, and that's just the top of the iceberg.

Nobody is really happy about what happened to Swissair, but we all agree in one thing: all of this could have been avoided with just a bit of common sense, a better treatment to long term employees, and wiser leadership. The problem is, some Swiss companies just simply don't know what common sense means, even less how to adapt to changing market conditions.

I'm writing this sitting in the waiting room of Gate D85 at Amsterdam airport, seeing the KLM employees unloading and loading stuff from those blue planes, and I remember a time when I used to do that job, too.

I think I'll start pouring some souvenirs about those times in the months to come.