

# Brace yourself

Water landings are rare, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be prepared – Andreas Spaeth reports from a ditching simulation class for passengers



All of a sudden, it's quiet. The aircraft shudders lightly. It's weird, this silence – it's not normal so soon after take off. The engines have failed. Two-dozen passengers are sitting in the cabin as the crew call out: "Heads down! Brace position!" Then an impact, followed by a short silence. "Life vests on! Don't inflate them yet! Everybody out, this way! Out! Now inflate the vests!" the attendants shout.

As if in a trance, the passengers try to follow the instructions. Within seconds, they have to master a complex series of actions. First, locate and remove the life vest from under the seat, open the pouch, remove the vest and put it on, then shut the latch between the elastic straps and pull them tight. Most

passengers are totally overwhelmed and forget to inflate their vests – others let the compressed air rush into the chambers and within fractions of a second the vest encloses the throat so tightly that it becomes hard to turn the head. Then, it's quickly down the slide.

This scarily lifelike scenario forms part of the water landing – or "ditching" – workshop run by the Vienna airport-based Aircraft Safety Network. Barbara Pencik is founder and lead instructor of what is one of the first passenger courses of its kind. "What we do in the moving cabin simulator is like what the passengers of an Airbus A320 experienced in New York on January 15, 2009 – they were in the air for just six minutes before landing in the Hudson River," she explains.

Flying has never been as safe as it is now, and it is extremely unlikely that a plane has to land on water instead of a runway – a **one in a million** chance per departure, according to risk calculation done by Lufthansa flight

training. It was only when captain Chesley Sullenberger landed US Airways flight 1549 in the water four years ago that the topic entered the public realm. But in April this year, another aircraft ended up in the sea – a brand new B737-800 from Indonesian low-cost carrier Lion Air, which undershot the runway at Denpasar in Bali. Luckily, as with the Hudson incident, there were no fatalities.

"That gave me the last kick to set up this seminar," Pencik says. Having spent 17 years as a flight attendant and safety trainer for Austrian Airlines, she still partially uses the carrier's facilities in Vienna to run her own company, not only training cabin staff from many airlines, but also any interested passenger.

What Pencik offers is rare – while British Airways Flight Training (ebaft.com) runs safety awareness courses at London Heathrow, it doesn't include hands-on ditching procedures. Most other airlines don't want to confront their clientele with accident scenarios at all, and reject any suggestion of training sessions for non-crew.

Pencik advocates the opposite: "Buying a ticket doesn't mean you buy 100 per cent safety – passenger behaviour in an emergency has a great influence on proceedings. You can and should actively influence safety as a passenger and not just consume it passively." She adds that, for crew, "the passenger is an important resource, letting us gain important seconds during an evacuation".

That's why Marina Knaupp is here, and not for the first time – the HR executive from Germany enjoys spending weekends with her frequent-flyer friends doing training for in-flight emergencies in Vienna. "Last time we learnt about the emergency slides and door opening – today is about ditching and tomorrow we'll deal with fire in the cabin. It's a lot of fun and useful at the same time," she says.

The 25 participants receive an introduction to the topic by Christian Korherr, a former captain with 12,000



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**Pictured:** Aircraft Safety Network ditching workshop

flight hours under his belt. "Pilots rarely receive practical ditching training – if they do, it's only down to 10cm above the water line – but we still feel well prepared", he says. "It is essential to hit the water with level wings, but you also need luck and low waves, like in the Hudson incident."

Being prepared is essential for passengers, too. "On the Hudson and in Bali, there was no warning, so nobody had life vests on," Pencik explains. She has analysed 179 ditching cases in aviation history. "Only in 22 cases, or 12 per cent, were there victims, meaning the survival rate is 88 per cent," she reports.

The practical part starts in an indoor pool close to the airport. Everyone is asked to don eyeshades to simulate darkness, then put on a vest and inflate it and jump into the water, and find other people to huddle with to conserve body warmth. An emergency slide is then inflated, which doubles as a life raft.

The difficult part is to get on the slide-cum-raft from the poolside – most people fall overboard, and it's even harder to get on top of it, hindered by the tight vest around your neck. But the worst is yet to come, and that is to haul oneself into the huge life raft carried on

narrow-bodied aircraft, weighing 90kg and fitting in up to 46 passengers.

In a mad dash, people try to grab straps hanging down into the water to lift themselves to safety. "It's easier if you help each other!" Pencik shouts. This is easier said than done – and I realise that

getting some practice in could make all the difference in such a situation.

■ Aircraft Safety Network (a-s-n.at) holds safety courses in German but can offer them in English on request. The next ditching course is on September 27 (3.30pm- 10pm) and is €160 per person.



## IF YOUR AIRCRAFT HAS TO DITCH

- Before every flight, check the safety card for what type of vest is on your aircraft, and look under your seat to make sure it's there.
- Only open the pouch and put on the vest if instructed to do so by the crew.
- Never inflate the vest inside the aircraft – do it once you step outside by pulling the two handles firmly.
- If the vest is too tight, let some air out by pushing a finger into the mouthpieces on both sides. If it is not tight enough, blow air into the mouthpieces.
- Before opening any aircraft door, check that it is above the water line. Often the rear doors cannot be used in a water evacuation.
- In the water, try to huddle together with other people to keep warm.
- Get on an emergency float or life raft ideally straight from the aircraft, otherwise from the water.