

With fatality statistics for U.S. flights hovering around 1 in 13 million fliers, the answer is "not likely." But for those who find comfort in cold, hard numbers, there is AmIGoingDown.com, which playfully estimates your chances of making it to your destination intact.

Launched last September, the London-based site transforms flight details such as airline, destination, and month of travel and aircraft model into "personalized mortality statistics" that may calm or traumatize, depending on whom you are and where you're flying. Accompanying the numbers are comments, from "That's really quite good" to "That's a little worse than usual". It sounds like the sort of idea born over a few beers, which the site's two creators say is pretty much the case. Celebrating a soccer victory at the local pub, Kip Parker and Paul Bailey brainstormed over the possibility of cranking out customized flight mortality numbers on command. Parker, 28, is a Web page designer; Bailey is employed by an aviation organization and works with statistics, "so he was in an ideal position to get that information", Parker says, declining to elaborate. "The organization would not, I think, be very happy to be publicly associated with our site". Some of the statistics can be a bit sobering: a 1-in-302,170 chance of misfortune from Afghanistan to Albania, for example. But "your worst bet is a Third World domestic flight at Christmastime in a propeller plane", Parker says.

Such figures don't sit well with some statisticians. "There's an aura of pseudo-precision around these numbers that goes beyond any of the mortality data we have," says Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Arnold Barnett, whose crash studies are used by the Federal Aviation Administration. The site "goes beyond anything a statistician would take seriously". Though the site's creators say some of the reports they use go back 20 years, Barnett suggests that much of the data cover too short a time to be accurate. Flying between Switzerland and Great Britain on SwissAir, for example, appears nearly four times riskier than flying British Airways. Barnett suspects that is based on the crash of Swissair Flight 111 in 1998. "It suggests (airlines) don't learn from mistakes, but are prisoners of their past," he says.

If the goal is to put people at ease about the relatively low risks of flying, Barnett says, there must be better ways to do it. "You're more likely to win the state lottery than you are to go down in flight." (On the other hand, "a lot of people expect to win the lottery, so that doesn't work", he wryly observes.) But most surfers will see that the site intends to poke fun at some people's tendency to panic. As Parker points out, "We can't claim to be too serious when we're called AmIGoingDown".

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