

The Tip Sheet

Smart Strategies for Your Money, Health,

Family, Technology, Design, Real Estate, Travel

THE LIST

Our top picks for the week ahead.



RENT

"Zodiac." David ("Se7en") Fincher's long, obsessive, fascinating account of the search for San Francisco's Zodiac killer zeroes in on the hunters (Jake Gyllenhaal, Robert Downey Jr., Mark Ruffalo), who become consumed by their quest.

READ

"Pudlo Paris 2007-2008" by Gilles Pudlowski (\$19.95). Available in English for the first time, this popular French guide reviews restaurants, bars, cafés and gourmet shops, and profiles the year's top chefs, bistros and bakers.



HEAR

"Beauty & Crime." Suzanne Vega celebrates her long-overdue return with this valentine to her hometown of New York City. The funky pop-folk collection proves that Vega is as original, gritty and gorgeous as ever.

EAT

Tyrrells Potato Chips, a new "crisp" from England (\$19 for five bags; chelseamarketbaskets.com). Our favorite was the addictively seasoned, award-winning Sweet Chili & Red Pepper.



GO

to the **27th Annual U.S. Open Sandcastle Competition** in Imperial Beach, Calif. It's the largest competition of its kind (July 27-29).

TRAVEL

HAPPY TARMAC SITTING!

BY LINDA STERN

HERE'S WHERE YOU don't want to spend your summer vacation: on the tarmac at JFK. Or sitting at the gate in O'Hare. Or waiting around in Detroit, Charlotte or any of the other stressed-out airports that are helping to make this air-travel season the worst ever. With a record 209 million passengers expected, most planes are full. Any slowdown—due to bad weather, oversold flights or mechanical problems—can escalate into a marathon lay-over. Even before the summer crush, almost one in every four domestic flights was delayed, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics. At the busiest airports, the rate approached twice that, and most experts say problems are underreported.

Airport horror stories are proliferating online. Ft. Worth, Texas, Web designer Robert McKee documented his 10 hours in airplane hell in a YouTube video ("Delta Flight 6499") that's painful to watch. He and his fellow nontravelers spent seven hours on the tarmac with no food but plenty of crying babies—the result of unspecified weather and mechanical problems. (Delta has apologized and offered the passengers vouchers.) The situation isn't likely to improve soon. The airlines say the problem lies in insufficient air routes and an antiquated air-traffic-control system. The controllers' union says it's short-handed. Passenger advocates like Kate Hanni of the Coalition for an Airline Passengers' Bill of Rights are



throwing their hands in the air: "Just take high-speed rail," she says. Since that's not usually practical, here's how to make sure you don't end up vacationing at the airport.

Research before you buy your ticket. Avoid the busiest airports and the busiest times, even if you have to drive a little bit farther. The Web site of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (www.natca.org) offers airport-specific reports on how to avoid delays, like "fly mornings at JFK, weekends at Logan." At flightstats.com, you can check the specific flights you are considering and see their record of on-time departures and cancellations. Also check avoiddelays.com, which

TROUBLE SPOTS

These most-delayed big-city airports are getting fewer than 70 percent of their flights off on time.

- Chicago O'Hare Intl.
- Portland (Maine) Intl.
- New York Kennedy Intl.
- Newark (N.J.) Liberty Intl.
- Charlotte-Douglas (N.C.) Intl.
- Philadelphia Intl.

SOURCE: BUREAU OF TRANSPORTATION STATISTICS

publishes rankings of the "worst offenders": those airlines, flights and airports that had the most and longest delays last summer. Plan to fly as early in the morning as possible: think 6:30 a.m. instead of 9. If you're lucky, you'll be in and out before troubles start. **Book a good ticket.** Online travel agents and consolidators may offer low prices, but the airlines may bump their clients first and work harder to find new flights for their own frequent fliers, says Hanni, who suggests travelers research online but buy their tickets directly from the airline. An old-fashioned paper ticket will help you jump to a different carrier more quickly if you do end up stranded at the airport, and in this environment a direct, nonstop flight may be worth some extra money. When you're making your reservation, allow at least two hours between connecting flights. And give yourself a buffer day. Don't expect to swoop in hours before a meeting or even the day before a big event, like a wedding.