Why/when did time stop for flying? (+ Planes vs Trains vs Cars vs Cycling)

 In 1960 we could fly at 39,000 feet, above the rough stuff, at darn near 600 miles per hour. And the sky was literally the limit. We dreamed and read about a future with supersonic and even hypersonic planes, and had wondered if we even wanted planes to go faster because the flying experience was so much fun. Comfortable seats, legroom, and your family and friends could see you off at the gate. Oh and if you were arriving late for your flight you could race through the airport without anyone calling in the national guard and they would sometimes even hold the plane for you.

But today (or is it tonight or tomorrow or even yesterday as we fly across the Pacific and the International Date Line, not to be confused with the regional versions), I'm packed tightly into what's essentially a bus with wings, flying slower than planes did 50 years ago, after having been dropped off at the curb by my daughter who, if she'd taken more than 11.6 seconds to say good-bye would have been given a ticket.

Trains? The golden age for trains had come and gone before my time so I've actually seen improvement, especially overseas. Cars? Seem about the same to me and I'm actually willing to admit they have more creature comforts (or at least cup holders) than before, but good luck finding that "wide, open road" that we used to crave so much. Bikes? Definitely improved; more comfortable, easier to use and more choices.

But air travel... What happened? Ok I understand the argument you get what you pay for and the $1105 round trip San Francisco to China would probably be the equivalent of $5000 back in the day. But shouldn't technology have offered us something, or was Popular Mechanics pure fiction and pipe dream? (And what is a "pipe dream" anyway? Guess when I'm on the ground I can look that up).

No flying cars. Slow planes. Movies that didn't make the grade in theaters being shown on first gen LCDS hanging down from the ceiling. We can go places, but aside from bikes and high speed rail, the experience doesn't match the desire.

I guess I'm coming back to that thing about the world going by at just the right speed on a bike. The experience is delivered at a pace that your mind can fully appreciate in real time. The sights, the smells, just the change of pace when you come to a hill or ride through a town breaks up the monotony of the journey, and the journey itself becomes as important as the destination.

Not so for flying. I've been in this metal tube for 6 hours and have another 6 to go before reaching Beijing. Trust me, this trip is all about the destination, not the journey. And the funny thing is, this is a pleasant flight with a good crew so it will end up on a relativistic scale as being considered a good flight which, in fact, means it's simply tolerable.

Can't we do better? If this was the experience cycling delivered, I wouldn't be selling many bikes! I am truly fortunate that I get to make a living helping people get out and enjoy the world, instead of having to use wildly deceptive advertising to convince people that you've got enough legroom to really stretch out in economy+ when the reality is that, if the guy in front of you reclines his seat, your laptop screen could get smashed and never mind the difficulty of trying to use it 6 inches in front of your face.

I hate riding on a trainer, but if they could set them up on a plane I'm sure the time would pass by more quickly and comfortably! But maybe they'd have to put me out on the wing so I'd at least have a decent view. :-)

And that brings us to a good conclusion. If I were out on the wing, getting to watch (but hopefully not smell) the world go by, 520 miles per hour might be just about right. But inside the cabin, anything less than Warp Speed is too slow. A severe mismatch of desired vs realized experience.

Cycling really wins out in that light. Desired vs realized experience.