

Snowden a No-Show as Reporters Head to Cuba

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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An empty passenger seat believed to have been booked by Snowden. **Maxim Shemetov**

All eyes were on seat 17A as a planeload of journalists strapped themselves in for an Aeroflot flight from Moscow to Cuba with former U.S. intelligence contractor Edward Snowden.

Their first disappointment was that Snowden did not show up. The second was that it was a booze-free flight — all 11 hours and 35 minutes of it.

Moscow-based journalists had scrambled to buy seats, at about \$2,000 for a return flight, in the hope of getting a few words from Snowden — or even a first sighting of him since he left Hong Kong on Sunday.

But the cat-and-mouse game continued, with the United States' most wanted man, charged with espionage for exposing the government's secret electronic surveillance programs, outwitting his pursuers yet again as he tried to evade prosecution.

Although airport sources had said Snowden was booked into seat 17A, someone else was sitting there as the plane took off.

"He's not on board," a flight attendant said. A source at Aeroflot said the same thing.

Journalists sent pictures of the empty seat from mobile phones.

A Twitter feed, @Snowdensseat, was soon set up in the name of seat 17A with messages such as: "Getting a lot of angry looks from journalists around me. Deadlines probably looming. Also, no booze served."

Had Snowden ever intended to take the flight? Or had he changed his mind at the last minute to shake the world's media off his tail? No one was quite sure.

An e-mail was soon doing the rounds suggesting Snowden could yet show up on the plane. It contained a link suggesting that the Airbus A330-200 may have a crew rest area below the flight deck where he could hide.

Snowden has managed to stay out of view since several sources reported his arrival at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport from Hong Kong on Sunday.

It was not until about four hours after the plane's departure that Julian Assange, founder of the WikiLeaks anti-secrecy group that is assisting Snowden, confirmed that Russia was a stop on his way to Ecuador.

Kremlin officials said they knew of no contact between Snowden and the Russian authorities. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said he had no details of Snowden's travel plans.

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