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By Max Fisher and the Washington Post Foreign Staff

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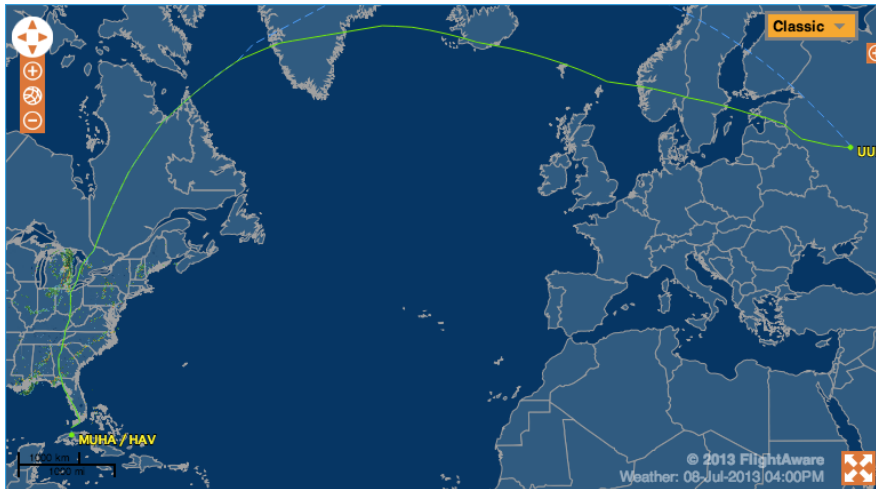
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## Snowden's five dubious options for getting to Venezuela

By Max Fisher, Published: July 9, 2013 at 3:36 pm [E-mail the writer](#)

Should NSA leaker Edward Snowden decide to accept Venezuela's offer of asylum, the tricky thing will be figuring how to get there from Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport. His big problem is that [after the strange saga of Bolivian President Evo Morales's flight over Europe](#), which included an unexpected stopover in Austria where the presidential plane may have been searched, Snowden might want to avoid flying over any countries friendly to the United States.

He appears to have, generally speaking, five options, each of which carries significant risk. Snowden may also end up seeking asylum in Nicaragua or Bolivia, which would entail similar routes. Here is a brief description of each, with pros and cons. They're ranked from least risky to riskiest. Looking these over, it's easy to wonder whether Snowden will ever get out of Moscow.



Aeroflot Flight 150 from Moscow to Havana, Monday, July 8. (FlightAware)

### (1) The smuggler's route

Probably the riskiest but most Hollywood-friendly option would be for Snowden to sneak onto an already scheduled flight from Moscow to Havana to Caracas and simply hope he doesn't get caught. Maybe that means flying under a false name if it's a commercial flight or boarding a cargo flight. The flight path would probably take him over U.S. airspace, as well as that of several U.S. allies: Canada, Norway and Sweden. The map above shows [the route of Monday's Moscow-Havana flight](#), which

spent several hours over the United States.

**Pros:** Fastest route, cheap and simple. Option for a cool disguise, possibly borrowing from the [Russian security services' wig collection](#).

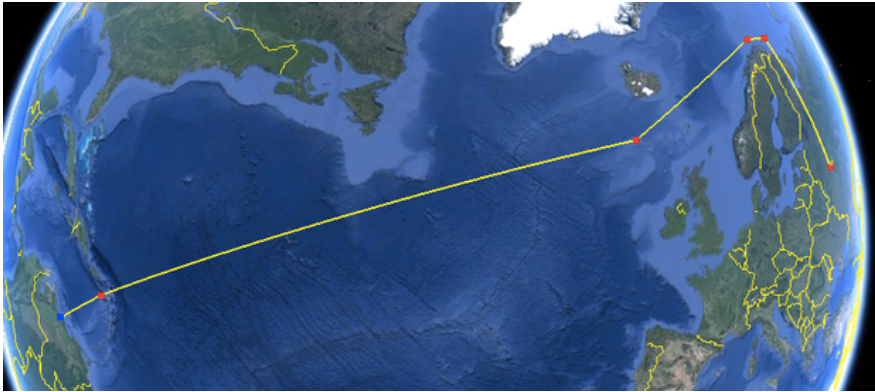
**Cons:** As Snowden knows, the United States has significant espionage capabilities. And he was initially supposed to fly to Havana but bailed; it's not clear why, but it's possible he had reason to believe the flight would not be safe for him.

## (2) The defiant anti-imperialist gambit

In this scenario, Snowden would take the same flight path as above but do it openly, possibly on the plane of a high-ranking Venezuelan leader, daring the world to stop him. The thinking would be that perhaps he could shame European countries out of grounding the plane.

**Pros:** No risk of getting "caught" if you're not hiding anything. Puts all the cards on the table. Whatever happens to the flight, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro looks like a brave anti-imperialist willing to stand up to the U.S. "empire."

**Cons:** If Morales couldn't get through on suspicion of sheltering Snowden, openly harboring him might be even riskier.



A hypothetical route avoiding all but Russian and Venezuelan airspace (Atlantic Wire).

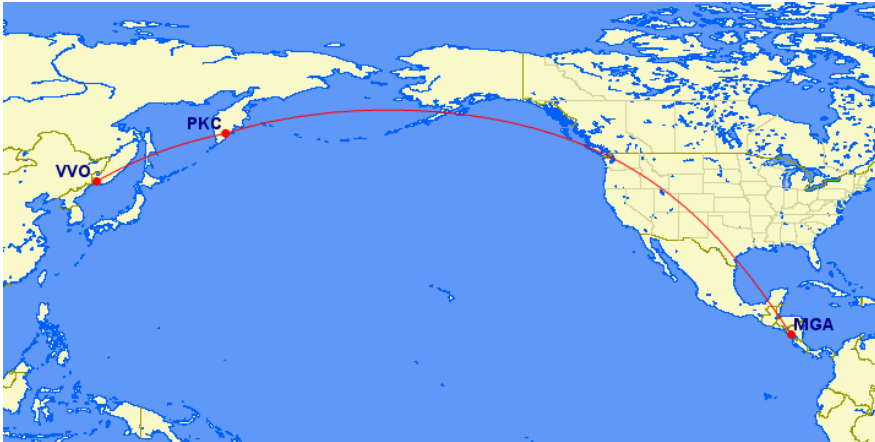
## (3) The long way

Also called "[the scenic route](#)," this much-discussed hypothetical flight path would require specially sending a plane along an elaborate Arctic and Atlantic route to avoid any airspace save Russia's and Venezuela's. Estimates of the distance involved vary from [6,835](#) to [6,924](#) miles.

**Pros:** Good way to avoid extradition, as it avoids flying over countries that might consider grounding the flight. It would probably be a private flight.

**Cons:** Expensive, potentially unsafe and a little too made-for-TV. Not many planes can fly that long without refueling: Some [point out](#) that a Gulfstream V-series jet could do it, but those planes [cost](#) tens of millions of dollars. Companies that do business with the United States or are just worried about their investment might not want to rent them out for an adventure with such high safety and political risks.

International air travel is highly regulated; Snowden would also need a flight crew willing to take the norm-flouting route. And most flights avoid spending hours over the open ocean, much less taking paths that might require dipping into reserve fuel, for safety reasons. Finally, if the flight has to divert for any reason, or is slowed down by headwinds, it could well end up in U.S. air space. And even a successful flight would require navigating around several Caribbean islands, some of them territorial possessions of the United States or Britain.



Map of Vladivostok-Petropavlovsk-Managua flight paths. (Great Circle Mapper)

#### (4) The Pacific Hail Mary

Welcome to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky Airport, a military- and civilian-use airfield way, way out in the remote Russian Far East. Snowden could hop there from the far eastern hub of Vladivostok, which is accessible by plane or rail from Moscow. The airport in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky offers no flights to Latin America, but it does have a runway long enough to handle large planes. He'd have to charter a special flight – and maybe even something longer-range than a Gulfstream V – for a special trans-Pacific haul. Nicaragua is the closest country that's friendly to him, although it's 6,554 miles even by the direct route that would take him over the United States. An indirect route that avoids U.S. air space could top 7,000 miles.

**Pros:** Avoids unfriendly airspace. None of the risky needle-threading required for the Atlantic route.

**Cons:** That trans-Pacific route is awfully long. Would require a special flight on a special plane. As with the Atlantic route, that would take a lot of money and a crew willing to accept the risks. Requires time in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, not exactly a tourism hub.



Map of Moscow-Tehran-Larnaca-Khartoum flight paths. (Great Circle Mapper)

**(5) The four-continent hop scotch**

Maybe Snowden can go around Europe from the south, skipping across Middle Eastern and African countries that are hostile to the United States, close with Russia or, in the case of some West African states overtaken by the drug trade, too corrupt to bring Snowden down. Getting from Moscow to Tehran is easy enough, and from there he could take a flight to Cyprus — a country heavily reliant on Russia. Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, is not too far. From there, getting to West Africa is hypothetically possible and, from there, Latin America is pretty close.

**Pros:** No dangerous and expensive trans-oceanic hauls. Relies on countries that have an interest in seeing him through. Could take commercial flights part or possibly all of the way.

**Cons:** Requires a flight over Egypt; despite rising anti-American attitudes there, the military is dependent on U.S. aid and might be wary of allowing the flyover at a time when some Americans are calling on the Obama administration to suspend that aid. There are no direct flights from West Africa to Venezuela, which means Snowden would either need a special flight or would have to travel through another Latin American country. Any path would require flying over several countries, maybe as many as a dozen, each one of which might decide — or be persuaded — to ground the flight. There's a reason this option is last.



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Map: How countries are answering Snowden's asylum requests