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As if Thanksgiving weren't stressful enough

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Thanksgiving isn't a holiday, it's an endurance test.

It's supposed to be about celebrating a holiday that originated with the Plymouth Colony's successful harvest (or conquest) in 1621. But no other day presents such a series of hurdles: enduring the worst traffic of the year; putting up with family members we've successfully avoided for 364 days; forcing us to be polite to people whose politics we abhor.

Let's start with the first Thanksgiving challenge - getting there. There's no way to avoid the pain of travel for this holiday. It even starts the weekend before, with trains jammed with college kids eager to get home. They don't want to be with their families, but to avoid writing term papers and the burden of preparing for final exams.

From then on, there's a steady increase in the number of delayed flights, lines at security checkpoints and crowds at train stations.

For many, getting to the Thursday meal requires only a drive to a cousin's or sister's home - a trip that normally takes, say, an hour or so. But there's no traffic like Thanksgiving Day traffic. Everyone's going somewhere, and they aren't taking the Long Island Rail Road when they're loaded down with sweet potato casserole, pumpkin pie or carrot pudding.

And unlike a normal business day, the highways are packed all day. Too many relatives love to arrive hours before the meal - completely disrupting the host's preparations. Only the skeletal brother-in-law who bikes from SoHo to Smithtown avoids the congestion.

Of course, the most difficult part of Thanksgiving Day is sitting through the meal itself. On Christmas, an exchange of gifts precedes the holiday dinner. At Passover, the seder is organized around prayers and readings. But Thanksgiving isn't a religious holiday like those, it's all about the food - and the competition to determine who's worked the longest, spent the most money, or made the healthiest salt-free, fat-free, sugar-free apricot-chestnut stuffing.

Thanksgiving is essentially an indoor Olympiad for all those people who don't cook

during the rest of the year. This is the one day when non-cooks try to be Julia Child or Wolfgang Puck. They are so proud that they've successfully maneuvered around the kitchen that they must give us the blow-by-blow: How they almost cut themselves opening the can of cranberries, how they saved time by using pre-cut squash and, of course, why it's better to serve turkey at room temperature, not hot, right out of the oven.

Since there are inevitably more consumers than cooks at the table, by the time seconds are offered, the conversation flows into the annual Thanksgiving Report. This is when the dysfunctional family comes alive.

All the rules of civil society are suspended: Nosy relatives suggest blind dates to divorced cousins, diet tips are provided to chubby boys, retired grandparents offer 1960s career advice to high school students. Praise comes only in the form of kindly admiration of a successful eyelift, Botox treatment or gastric bypass.

This year, there's a new after-dinner game to compete with watching football on the 60-inch plasma television set: "Everyone Is a Real Estate Expert," in which guests brag about selling their house before prices collapsed or how they are waiting until the right moment - when every investment bank announces that there will be no bonuses - to acquire a foreclosed home in Bridgehampton.

Despite scientific evidence that chemicals in turkey can induce tiredness, the real source of Thanksgiving fatigue isn't the food, it's the stress. It's no wonder we're thankful after Thanksgiving - we're dreaming about going to a restaurant next year. We'll undoubtedly miss the warmth and festivity of a holiday get-together, but dining out could be a great way to spur the local economy.