

Barnett on Business Travel: Airline fares, and perks, vary widely on trips to India

by *Chris_Barnett*

For decades, a cartoon mustached Maharaja in striped turban and pointy slippers relaxing on a flying carpet, ruled the skies between the U.S. and India. The Air India mascot had zero competition wooing worldly, adventurous American tourists to visit the Taj Mahal, grand palaces and ride the elephants.

No longer. With India's gross domestic product reportedly growing at a stunning 9 percent annually, with industrial production up 12.5 percent this year, with U.S. companies setting up outposts to cash in on low-wage factories and low-priced high-tech expertise, and with Indian multinationals buying up American corporations thanks to our sickly dollar. There's an armada of U.S. and Indian airlines shuttling between the two countries.

Houston-based Continental is the clear trailblazer. Two years ago, it launched the first scheduled nonstop to India by a U.S. carrier. A daily 777 flight from its Newark Liberty Airport hub to the country's capital city of New Delhi, 80 percent of seats have been filled on average. This month it added a 777 nonstop from Newark to Mumbai, India's sprawling yet densely packed (23 to 25 million people) commercial and entertainment boomtown. The long haul (16-hour) Mumbai flight started off four times a week, but goes daily on Nov. 2.

I was aboard Continental's Mumbai maiden flight and one thing is obvious: If you're flying 8,000 miles straight and need to be alert and lucid to meet your greeters - and chances are there will be plenty of them - book the airline's 50-seat luxe BusinessFirst class. The round-trip fare starts at \$4,778 for 21-day advance purchase \$7,115 for a 14-day advance buy. But it's money well spent.

Unless you can immediately go into deep hibernation mode at takeoff in a window seat with the standard 31-inches of legroom, forget economy class on a haul this long. These flights are virtually sold out and you'll never get three seats across to stretch out.

Continental's BusinessFirst was smooth sailing door to door. The ticket is free admission to the President's Club, which I consider to be, flat out, the best of the airport club room concepts among the U.S. airlines. While carriers are scrounging to cut every expense possible in tough times, Continental gives club members and visitors free drinks, pours fine wines at just above cost and has plenty of computer workstations with a choice of WiFi or hard-wired broadband. And both worked instantly without a glitch. Few luxury hotels that charge \$10 to \$15 for Internet access can make that claim.

Onboard BusinessFirst lives up to its name. The Boeing 777-200 has in-seat AC power ports so you can plug in a laptop computer, or any electronic gadget like at home. Aircraft, as we know, can always be switched out so bring your adapters to be on the safe side. The flight takes off at 7:30 p.m. and dinner is served, but not rushed.

A chilled lobster half was served as an appetizer. The four main courses include two Indian entrees - lamb chops in yogurt cream sauce and a vegetarian dish too extensive to describe. The coffee is actually rich and, as a nice touch, espresso and cappuccino are freshly brewed in the galley. Or if you'd rather work or watch a movie first, dinner can be served when you want it, like in a restaurant.

Continental's premium class doesn't have the lie-flat beds but push a button and the wide leather seat reclines, the foot rest comes up and for once, I slept six hours at 40,000 feet without popping an Ambien. The seat also has a personal flip-up, push-button video entertainment system programmed with over 250 films, 300 TV programs, 1,500 songs and 25 video games.

Breakfast arrives a couple hours before landing at Mumbai. Amazingly, I came off the 16-hour flight energized and with no jet lag.

U.S. to India is becoming a dogfight for the business travel dollar. American Airlines' longest nonstop flight is its daily 777 from Chicago to New Dehli inaugurated two years ago. American operates three classes of service, charges around \$8,200 for round-trip business class; however, its widely publicized new business class isn't installed on the 777 yet. An American spokesman says the flight is filling "over 80 percent" of its seats, but claims the airline has no plans to add more India destinations.

On Oct. 28, Jet Airways, a spirited rival to government-owned Air India, brings its second daily 777 into New York's JFK from New Dehli. Jet launched a daily 777 flight to Newark from Mumbai in August and operates a third flight between Toronto and Chennai (Madras). However, while its aircraft have the range to fly the 7,500 to 8,000 miles without refueling, the three Jet Airways flights stop for two hours in Brussels, Belgium. Jet's business class, called Premier, has seats that fold down to 73-inch long flat beds and a 15.4 inch video screen. Jet's 20-hour Premier class flights are priced at \$6,493 round-trip. The airline reportedly will add Los Angeles to its schedule in early 2008.

Delta flies from New York's JFK to Mumbai in two directions. One leaves at 6 p.m. via Milan in a code share with Alitalia. There's a two-and-a-half hour layover at Malpensa Airport while passengers and baggage transfer from Delta to Alitalia making it a 19-hour flight. Delta quotes a business class fare for the one-stop booked two weeks in advance at \$7,447 round trip. The other flight is a nonstop 777 direct from JFK to Mumbai. To save the layover and plane change, the business class fare jumps to \$8,938 round trip.

For the budget conscious business traveler, there's Air India, once the luxury airline founded and run by India's giant Tata Group until it was nationalized by the government. J.R.D. Tata himself flew the first flight, a mail run in 1932, in a flimsy single-engine Dehavilland Puss Moth. Air India also flies a daily nonstop 777 from New York JFK to Mumbai. Round trip business class fare is \$3,981 if you buy the tickets two week in advance. Air India also flies one-stops to India from Chicago, Los Angeles and Toronto via either London or Frankfurt at the same fares.

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