

Barnett on Business Travel: Seeking refuge in an airport VIP club can be pricey

by *Chris_Barnett*

The "perfect storm" for holiday travelers is gathering fast this year. Packed planes, high fares even if you book ahead, more people vying for fewer flights, and the near certainty of winter weather delays. It's especially tough for business travelers on crunch deadlines and tight meeting schedules. But sometimes you can get lucky.

I did recently, sort of. Shopping for a reasonable fare from San Francisco to Madison, Wis., 25 days before takeoff, Northwest and United were both quoting just south of \$600. American had a \$360 round trip economy fare on a Tuesday, but it included a three-hour layover in St. Louis with a regional jet connection to Madison. It was a 7 a.m. departure, which was fine by me because flight delays typically occur in late afternoon and evenings.

Getting out of San Francisco was surprisingly easy two days before Thanksgiving. I skipped the long, winding check-in lines by slipping a skycap \$3 for my garment bag. American, in a shameful grab for extra revenues, charges \$2 for the timesaving privilege of curbside check-in and doesn't give a dime to the skycap, so don't forget to tip him. San Francisco's airport security lines couldn't be dodged, but the Transportation Security Agency team was supremely organized this day and lines moved quickly. So far, so good.

American, and most of the other Big Six carriers, give economy passengers absolutely nothing for breakfast, not even a cracker. You have to fly over two hours to receive even a "snack," which is OK if you're fasting. I indulged myself in a surprisingly tasty breakfast of scrambled eggs, fresh fruit and toast for \$9 in the Mission Deli at the American terminal. Otherwise, it would have been the plastic-wrapped \$5 bagel with turkey and cheese or \$3 potato chips hawked onboard from a rolling cart on flights over three hours long. Strategic solution: Pack your own breakfast.

My luck ran out at St. Louis' Lambert Field where we landed at 1 p.m. for the long layover and plane change. The airport was a crush of pre-holiday travelers and road warriors that filled every table in every restaurant and bar in the C terminal. No place to plug in and recharge a laptop computer or cell phone, let alone do some overdue writing and paperwork in anything close to comfort.

With three hours to kill, I figured a day pass at the Admiral's Club was worth \$50, especially since space and serenity in the clubroom is part of the package. An annual club membership is \$450 or 70,000 AAdvantage miles, a decent deal for American Airline loyalists. But a smarter buy is the Priority Pass (www.prioritypass.com) that opens the door to 500 airline lounges in 275 cities for a fee starting at \$99 and \$27 per club visit.

The Admiral's Club was quiet in the early afternoon, but the calm quickly morphed into frustration for me. Unlike, say, Continental's Presidents' Club where the wireless Internet connection is free and always works

instantly, American has cut a deal with T-Mobile. If T-Mobile isn't your Internet carrier, you have to pony up beyond the price of admission to get online.

Once again I was in luck. I just happened to have a prepaid 24 hour T-mobile wireless Internet card; I could beat the system or so I thought. I could not get it to work and after eight calls to T-Mobile customer service's 800 number and getting transferred and bounced around to service reps, it was clear T-Mobile's customer-help troops had no idea what I was talking about or how to use the prepaid Internet card.

Thwarted and wasting time, I opted for the much slower but usually reliable Internet dial-up. An Admiral's Club staffer said to ask the desk for a cord to hook up my laptop to a phone jack, dial up circa 1997.

Now my luck was going from bad to miserable. They couldn't find an available phone cord in the entire club. By now, I've blown almost an hour and a half of my \$50 visit to the Admiral's Club sanctuary; however, worse was the maddening feeling of helplessness and the almost "sorry about that" attitude. Obviously, now I will always pack a back-up phone cord.

After more fiddling with the laptop, including an attempted assist from the nice guy in the next cubicle, I figured a glass of wine might sooth my nerves, even though it was the middle of the day. But I didn't feel like springing \$7.50 for a glass of the junk chardonnay. So I went down to the front desk and said, rather loudly, there "has to be an available phone cord somewhere in this Admiral's Club so I can get online and e-mail documents to people who are waiting for them."

Magically, a phone cord appeared from a storeroom. I dashed upstairs, plugged it in and dialed up, but the dreaded sound that says "no way, pal, are you going to connect today" flooded out from somewhere deep inside my laptop. Meantime, it was a half-hour before boarding the Madison flight. My clubroom visit was a complete waste of time and \$50, though I did get a free coffee and a cracker.

On the way out, a smiling Admiral's Club hostess who had just started her shift asked if all went well? When I gave her the short version of my tale of Internet woes, she asked "Why didn't you use the airport's Internet Wi-Fi access? It competes with us and we usually don't mention it, but it's free and it works."

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassle.

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