

Barnett on Business Travel: Economy class on flights can be a tolerable value

by *Chris_Barnett*

Shocking but true. Not every business traveler flies in the front of the plane or on the new crop of small, super-luxury, all-business-class jets that promise acres of legroom and cabin service fit for a sheik. Nor does every CEO have a private corporate jet.

But it would seem that way based on recent press coverage of these luxury hotels with wings. Lufthansa's all-business-class 737, actually leased from another company, was a novel idea when the economy was booming - jet fuel was cheap and British Airways and Air France grounded the sleek but aging Concorde. There were frills aplenty in the skies about five years ago.

Now, for company chieftains, investment bankers and high-roller vacationers, we have Eos Airlines, akin to a private jet with 48 first-class seats spread out throughout a 757 and a squadron of flight attendants at your service. There is Silverjet, Britain's answer to Eos in a business-class configuration in a 767, and British Airways is planning to enter the fray with its own version of an all-business magic carpet. KLM has a posh plane for Atlantic crossings.

Not all these brainstorm work. Maxjet, a discount, all-business-class entry, folded after a couple of years.

The reality is that business class is out of the reach of most travelers. Many giant companies expect their corporate travelers to fly coach or upgrade with their own frequent-flyer miles. Unless you are at a super-elite level in a program, upgrades are tough to come by.

Just ask Bill Armbruster, editor of the Shipping Digest, a prominent global trade magazine. On his own time and own dime, he recently flew to Hong Kong from Newark, N.J., on Continental - a 16-hour, nonstop flight - in economy. He didn't have enough frequent-flyer miles to move up to a front cabin for a round trip to a meeting of the East/West Center.

Armbruster booked his own flight. For \$1,398, he flew Continental from Newark to Hong Kong, Emirates Air to Bangkok, Thailand, Japan Airlines from Bangkok to Tokyo, and back to Newark on Japan Airlines.

A critical-eyed writer/editor and a self-admitted insomniac, he says Continental's economy class wasn't bad.

"I watched two movies, had an aisle seat, the meals were OK and even though the plane was packed,"

says Armbruster. "I didn't have any problems and all the flights were on time."

He did have some annoyances on his trip. Emirates Air, in Asia, gangloads its planes rather than back to front. Hotel taxis had steeper meters - three times higher - than cabs hailed. The three-star Hotel Bangkok's business center was stocked with old, slow computers, and pricey to boot, though the room rate was only \$60 a night. But Bangkok's Novotel, where the conference was held - a 50-cent, one-stop ride away on the Skytrain - had all the modern technology and facilities for a business traveler. Karen Lippe-Ferrell, executive director of marketing for Seven Crown Resort of Irvine, Calif., a houseboat vacation rental firm, flies American Airlines internationally and said coach class is "extremely uncomfortable" ever since the legroom was reduced by the carrier to squeeze in more seats.

Lippe-Ferrell flies economy to save her company (and herself) money, but she pays a price if she cannot upgrade to business class with her miles. On a flight from Los Angeles to Paris, she came off the plane "cramped and miserable, and that's hard when you don't want to lose a day (not arriving refreshed) on an international trip."

The marketing executive "doesn't like to spend a ton of money and I shop hard on the Web sites." Her favorites: Mobissimo.com., Kayak.com, Travelocity, Expedia and the airline sites.

She has booked business class on domestic trips when the fares haven't been over the moon. Lippe-Ferrell says AirTran's front-of-the-plane section "was not very comfortable."

A great deal on a little-known airline with a comfortable coach cabin is Air Tahiti Nui.

"I paid \$500 from LAX to Paris round trip," says Lippe-Ferrell. "Otherwise the best fare I could find was \$1,100.

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

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