

Barnett on Business Travel: Expanding both routes and legroom, JetBlue mostly a hit with travelers

by Chris Barnett

JetBlue Airways has been a darling of the skies since its maiden voyage in early 2000, wooing travelers with a seductive perfume of low-fare nonstops, 36 channels of live TV free in every seat back and more legroom than its bigger, pricier competitors.

Now, it's getting roomier. The airline is removing a row of gray leather seats from its all-coach A-320 aircraft, boosting legroom on the first 11 rows from the current 32 inches to a spacious 36 inches, making it the roomiest economy class seat of any U.S. airline. With the reconfiguration, the exit rows will have 38 inches of legroom, while all other seats in the plane will stay at the existing, very comfortable 34-inch seat pitch.

The makeover is absolute heaven for business travelers who need to work on their laptop computers or simply stretch out.

(United is the only other U.S. airline with 36-inch legroom in coach, but it's limited to the first eight rows. Known as Economy Plus and ranging from 34 inches to 36 inches, depending on the aircraft, it's a perk that's usually reserved for elite-level members of its Mileage Plus frequent flyer program. United will also rent you one for an extra \$25 to \$50 one-way.)

JetBlue's decision to jettison a row of seats is not just a random act of generosity. By reducing capacity to 150 seats, it can also eliminate one flight attendant and still conform to Federal Aviation Administration staffing requirements of one cabin attendant for every 50 seats.

I can live with that. After all, JetBlue isn't serving full-course dinners on linen. The cutback might shake up the airline's in-flight and gate troops a bit. After regularly winning praise for their friendly, helpful attitudes, I've noticed some employees have become complacent. JetBlue's in-flight supervisors are either asleep at the switch or looking the other way to avoid labor turbulence in its nonunion ranks.

On a Jan. 21 flight from Washington Dulles to Oakland, Calif., one flight attendant could have been left behind and the passengers sitting around me would have been happier. I first noticed that he was playing some kind of peek-a-boo with a female flight attendant in the bathroom. Repeatedly opening and closing the lavatory door with a salacious grin sends the wrong message to passengers.

That was his only smile during the flight; plus he was rude. When the woman sitting across the aisle from me asked if JetBlue had any fruit juice, he condescendingly said yes. Then she had to ask, "Well, what kind of juice do you serve?" He replied but looked annoyed. A man one row up was working on papers at his tray

table and asked the same flight attendant if he could take some trash, only to be brusquely waved off without a word. I got a few snippy answers as well.

He and his attitude seemed to be an exception. Flight attendants on my glitch-free San Francisco-to-Dulles leg of the trip were more welcoming and patient. One was a United flight attendant for six years who bailed out when she was suffering pay and benefit concessions while senior executives were pocketing bonuses. Another JetBlue flight attendant is also hospital emergency room nurse who quite nurturing and attentive.

However, the gate agents at Dulles appeared overwhelmed by a two-hour delay because of the season's first snowfall, which required de-icing the aircraft. I heard from another passenger we were changing gates for boarding. Announcements were spotty and no one seemed informed and in command. But travelers flying JetBlue that night were calm and mellow - most were watching the playoff game between Indianapolis Colts and the New England Patriots.

Once we were onboard, JetBlue regained its customer service luster. We could catch the final five thrilling minutes of the game that sent the Colts to the Super Bowl live on the seat-back TV. The airline gave us one cocktail and one of the three \$5 movies on the house for our troubles - a classy touch since the delay was unavoidable.

In 2006, the airline was on an expansion tear, adding 16 new cities, but it's changing course this year and slowing its growth. Still, the start-up service announced so far this year is good news for business and pleasure flyers. Earlier this month, JetBlue moved into Chicago O'Hare with five daily A-320 flights to New York's JFK and two flights to Long Beach, Calif.

Big news in the Bay Area is that the airline will start flying out of SFO on May 3 with four daily A-320 flights to JFK and one to Boston, saving San Franciscans a trip across the often-logjammed Bay Bridge to Oakland. In April, the airline will connect White Plains, N.Y., with Orlando, Fort Lauderdale and Palm Beach, Fla.

Several years ago, JetBlue conquered the space problems with regional jets - those claustrophobic 50-seaters that the major airlines are now using on flights as long as two hours or sometimes longer. Travelers often enter those planes hunched over because the ceiling is so low and sit in tight seats where it's practically impossible to open a computer.

JetBlue's version of the regional jet, the Brazilian-made Embraer 190, holds 100 passengers economy class with no middle seat, and a 6-foot-7 incher can stand tall. Legroom is 32 to 33 inches, more than what American, United, Delta and other major airlines offer in coach on their big jets.

The six-year-old airline is slowly winning over business travelers - even those with huge balances in their frequent flyer mile account. Michael Penney, managing director of Blue Ridge Partners, a McLean, Va., consulting firm, is a good example.

"Last year, I flew 150,000 miles with United, but they quoted me \$600 on this flight (Washington Dulles to San Francisco, round trip) and JetBlue was \$119 each way," Penney said. "And even when I had to revise my itinerary, JetBlue didn't charge me a change fee, and the new fare is still \$200 cheaper than United's quote. It's comfortable, friendly and cost-effective."

Still, Penney hasn't abandoned United. He books its premium economy class from Washington-Dulles to London for \$600. "I can't justify the \$6,000 British Airways charges for the same flight in business class."

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