

Barnett on Business Travel: Hawaiian Airlines provides old-fashioned service

by *Chris_Barnett*

At a time when most U.S. airlines are boxcars with wings treating passengers like freight, Hawaiian Airlines must be doing something wrong.

Its airport counter agents greet you with a smile. They're willing to check you in the old-fashioned way if you don't want to tussle with a touch-screen terminal. Gate agents seem happy, not harried. Flight attendants aren't grumpy or bored and do not bad-mouth the bosses. You get real food with a choice of three meals in economy. In first class on some long flights, a new culinary scheme can pass for restaurant cuisine - it's that tasty and pretty.

What's more, you're not crammed and jammed. Even short interisland flights use Boeing 717s, a smaller version of the 737, and have first-class sections. Plus, Hawaiian Air has the best on-time record of all U.S. airlines.

Now, granted, its routes aren't cursed with thunderstorms and blizzards, but it does fly to mainland airports like SFO, LAX and McCarran Las Vegas, where delays and logjams are commonplace.

Is Hawaiian Air a throwback to the long-gone good old days of air travel? Can't go that far. But if a recent first-class, round-trip flight from San Francisco to Kauai with an inter-island connection at Honolulu is any barometer, the gate-to-gate experience shows me at least the airline is enlightened, rather than embattled - a coup, considering it exited bankruptcy just two years ago.

Example: In casual conversation, a flight attendant told me that practically the entire cabin crew working the 767 has about 20 years experience with Hawaiian.

"Sure, we've had our ups and downs and concessions over the years, but this is a great place to work," said Rick, a seemingly relaxed, late 40-something chap. "No one ever leaves."

When is the last time a crewmember was that lyrical about management?

We shoved off on time at SFO and the 767-300ER was packed, clean and the interior was in good shape. No power ports for laptopers, so bring extra batteries if you're going to work. Hawaiian doesn't scrimp on champagne, juices or the signature Pomegranate Passion at takeoff. However, the coffee wasn't up to snuff; I was expecting Kona at the least, but I was told it's a "Kona blend." Within a reasonable time, lunch was served

on linen with stainless silverware. And, it's imaginative.

The airline hired Beverly Gannon, designated as one of the Hawaii Regional Cuisine chefs (a serious accolade) who cooked up the clever idea of small-plate entrees, and you get three out of five choices served on stylish white square plates. I won't recite the entire menu, but the chicken Tandoori with a tangy Makhani sauce and Sultana Bamsati rice pilaf will give you an idea. The fancy food phases in systemwide this month.

It must be good, because the flight crews are "actually eating it," said Louis St-Cyr, vice president of in-flight services, "and weren't eating the food before." Because Gannon's food is actually enticing, the crew is eating the entrees that weren't chosen.

"We're saving money because we're not paying for crew meals," said the official.

Hawaiian solved the in-seat entertainment issue with a device called a Digiplayer - a 9-inch, hand-held unit preloaded with 15 movies, TV sitcoms, music videos, audio programming and kids cartoons. They're gratis in first class along with noise-reducing headphones. In economy, they fetch \$15. Basic movies are still free. Need to work on a laptop? Legroom in economy is 32 inches and 42 inches in first class, making it comfortable.

Meantime, Hawaiian has made another smart move. They're a cashless airline in-flight. You pay for the \$5 drinks in coach or the Digiplayer with a credit or debit card. Flight attendants don't have to play banker and remember who gave them the \$20 and needs change.

Hawaiian Air's pricing is just as creative. My round-trip ticket cost \$1,619 and it was refundable and changeable. A Honolulu agency quoted me \$2,095 on Hawaiian for the same route. Delta and Northwest quoted \$1,842 for SFO to HNL first class and that was without the last leg to Kauai. No question: Shop early and hard. Interisland flights are a bitter price war and fare matching between Hawaiian Air, Aloha, Pacific Wings and Mokulele Air is the subject of another column.

Hawaiian touts discounts of up to 25 percent for regular corporate customers. The airline has a partnership with Continental that allows OnePass members to earn and burn miles on Hawaiian and vice versa for members of HawaiianMiles, its frequent flyer program.

My seatmate, Thomas Rosati, vice president of Driftwood Hospitality Management and a seasoned business traveler, knows how to play the game. Hawaiian e-mailed him a special economy round-trip fare for \$388 to Kauai from West Palm Beach, Fla. Normally, it's \$600. He ponied up 15,000 OnePass miles each way and upgraded to first class. The partnership works out for him.

"Honestly, Continental is my airline of choice and I'm Platinum with 2 million miles."

Ironically, Hawaiian doesn't have direct mainland service to the Big Island, where more time-pressed businesspeople are visiting and living. Kurt Brouwer, president of Brouwer & Janachowski in Tiburon, Calif., north of San Francisco, spends three weeks a month on the Kohala Coast. He flies Aloha nonstop from Kona to Oakland but isn't happy.

"I prefer it in many ways, but we've been very disappointed in the scheduling, reliability and on-time record," says Brouwer. He's been rerouted through Honolulu with no advance warning and flights have been cancelled. Now he flies United from Kona to San Francisco but would like to see Hawaiian launch operations on the state's largest island.

Still, Hawaiian is not all mangos and cream. The Premier Club costs \$150 a year and members get nothing special except a place to sit, watch TV, have a coffee and try and hook up their laptop computers to the Internet. Local calls are free. There is only one location in the sprawling Honolulu Airport, near the interisland gates.

On the return leg, a rookie flight attendant clearly needed some mentoring. I asked three times for an OJ before it arrived. Plus, I got snubbed by a customer service agent in Honolulu when I asked what I had to do to replace a ticket I misplaced. She shrugged. I asked for a supervisor and he said since "it was an electronic ticket, no problem. We'll print another one."

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

Â© Copley News Service

Barnett on Business Travel: Hawaiian Airlines provides old-fashioned service by Chris_Barnett