

Barnett on Business Travel: Virgin America's first class is priced lower than United's economy

by *Chris_Barnett*

Finally, some good - no make that great - news for cost-conscious, comfort-seeking, style savvy business travelers who shuttle between San Francisco and Los Angeles. After years of paying a king's ransom to United for a nonstop between SFO and LAX and getting squished seats, bland to bad service and suspicious cancellations, the charming buccaneer of the skies, Sir Richard Branson, has parachuted in with his Virgin America.

Well, Virgin America is not 100 percent his, but that's another story and who cares? Branson and his band of merry men and women are liberating hostages on the busy, once fiercely competitive 'California Corridor' with flights as low as \$44 one way, a seat-back bijou with free TV and 25 pay-per-view movies, and black leather seats with 32 inches of legroom in economy. Plus, Virgin has a first-class cabin with a whopping 55 inches of legroom, lumber support, leg rests and, yes, a built-in-massage feature. Virgin First is a better bargain than United's cramped, spartan coach service - \$278 versus \$339 round trip - on a buy today, fly tomorrow basis.

Virgin America is also flying LAX and SFO to JFK and will add Washington and Boston soon. Again, another story. But more good news. All its new A-319 and A-320 jets have 110 AC power ports at every seat for laptops or any electronic gear with a two-prong plug. No more dead batteries in-flight or scrambling for the right adapter. And a spec sheet says there's mood lighting, and you can order a boxed lunch from the touch screen and it's delivered to your seat.

It's the SFO to LAX flights that thrill me, even though I haven't flown them yet. The \$44 one-way inaugural fare on all flights was still offered on some coastal flight past its trumpeted Aug. 8 cutoff when I went online to book an Aug. 9 flight with no advanced purchase. Maximum fare between SFO and LAX is currently \$99; however, they vary during the day depending on demand. Check the somewhat confusing Web site, www.virginamerica.com, which is tough to navigate and needs some redesigning.

Save \$5 each way with a Web booking and you also save some frustration trying to dial 877-fly-virginamerica. Sir Richard, how about putting a prominent numerical phone number on the Web site? Dialing letters is a branding ploy that ticks off dialers.

Still, minor annoyances when you consider the pricing and the perks that Sir Richard is giving the corridor crowd. For starters, San Franciscans no longer need to trek to Oakland, Calif., and fly Southwest down south. Between Oakland Airport's ongoing construction and the jillions of summer flyers jamming security lines, I missed a flight this week.

However, Southwest is returning to SFO at the end of the month, which will save time for LAX bound travelers, although it's still the galloping herd dashing for any seat and a bag of peanuts. Worse yet, Southwest is having some dissension among the troops. The three flight attendants on the last flight out of John Wayne

Airport in Orange County, Calif., to Oakland were not happy campers. Only one mustered a smile for 70 minutes and it was forced.

Is that legendary 'luv' and 'spirit' vanishing? After all, Southwest's bourbon sipping, arm-wrestling and all around fun founder-messiah Herb Kelleher severed his last connection with the airline.

But United isn't the only Big Six carrier that's looting the business traveler on the route. American Airlines, with 10 flights daily between SFO and LAX, is quoting \$229 on the Web for very early and very late flights. And, strap yourself in for this one, \$539.80 roundtrip for midday departures. Granted these are 'buy and fly' fares with no advanced purchase; however, we all know too well the business crowd can get a phone call or e-mail and must dash to the airport.

Now, if you're one of the privileged few whose company will spring for a full-fare coach ticket, American has a fare called Coach Automatic Upgrade on sever midday and evening SFO-to-LAX flights that will vault you to first class. Terms and tariff is odd. It's \$578.80 roundtrip and non-refundable. Or, if you're a oil sheik or a CEO without a private jet, AA has an anytime fully refundable first class fare of a mere \$1,394.80 roundtrip for the hour-and-15 minute 'journey' between the international airports of San Francisco and Los Angeles. Great way to rack up nearly 2,000 frequent flyer miles if you buy the ticket with your AAdvantage card and tack on the 400 mile flight.

But now Mr. or Ms. Bigwig can book Virgin America first class on the same route for a scant \$278 and get an electronic-powered, leather, upholstered back massage to boot, plus all the other swag and service doled out up front - or so I'm told. To find out, I'm going to put down some plastic and will give you dispatch from 40,000 feet.

Next time: Revisiting the East Coast shuttle a year later.

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

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