

Jeremy's World: Consistently inconsistent



Premium passengers face a 'codeshare lottery' where booking Business Class on one airline can result in being placed on a carrier with a very different seat, service style and onboard experience—despite paying the premium fare

Well, I trust we have all now safely returned from this year's World Travel Catering & Onboard Services Expo and I hope you all had a good journey. It was a great pleasure to meet many old colleagues and make new friends, and we had a marvelous time as usual... or did we?

The expo and the events were all great. May I also heartily congratulate all the PAX Readership Award winners and indeed winners of all awards from various quarters. The results genuinely show that airlines and caterers, and we consultants, are doing our best to improve.

But, I have to say that the travel experience going through multiple airports, especially in Europe, is becoming ever more frustratingly inconsistent. I am fortunate to live here in Southeast Asia where, generally speaking, the standards are still very high. Europe, however where one would expect to see consistent quality across the continent, is another story.

I realize that much of these inconsistencies are not always the airline's fault but surely there is more that we should be doing to try to remove the many inconsistent products and experiences prevalent on European airlines and ports.

Airlines first. I just have to look at the inconsistency of Business Class offerings in European airlines compared to Asian or even American carriers. Europe still has a very long way to go. In fact it has gone backwards.

U.S. domestic First is markedly better than domestic Economy—which frankly speaking could not really get much worse. The combination of economic crashes, geopolitical crises and health scares has given the bean-counters, even at the famous legacy carriers, the opportunity reduce the product to the bare minimum. Domestic First though, retains space, offers better service and some semblance of what airline travel used to be.

Asian carriers follow a similar pattern with most legacies making a marked distinction between Economy and Business on even the shortest routes. Europe by contrast has been having a bit of a laugh at our expense.

It began with the genius idea of not reconfiguring anything on the aircraft, but simply leaving the middle seat free and selling it as “Premium.”

It is not. Legacy carriers offer you similar legroom as the lowest of low-cost carriers.

Paying five times more for a seat that offers the same space as a budget airline—separated only by a flimsy curtain, early boarding and a meal worth a fraction of the fare—simply no longer cuts it.

The codeshare lottery

There are some exceptions with Turkish and Aegean especially offering an amazing up-front experience regionally. The inconsistency becomes a real problem and extends to long-haul once the codeshare is revealed. You can buy a ticket through one airline but end up on another.

In fact the codeshare lottery is a real conundrum and demonstrates total inconsistency in product for the same price. Looking at Southeast Asia to Europe is a route I do often. If I buy a Biz Class using a well-known Middle East carrier expecting that level of service, I may be placed on a code-shared operator from Europe which offers a lot less.

I pay for and expect hide-away seat privacy, candle-lit traysets, top notch bubbles, luxury smellies and cosy jim-jams but may end up with a seat that does not move, meals served when you are told rather than dine on demand, Prosecco and a bamboo comb in an eco-pouch.

And I will not not even begin to talk about baggage. The inconsistency across all carriers on cabin baggage allowances is now so complicated and confusing that if you are flying multiple airlines, it is wise to carry nothing other than a toothbrush holder and check the rest in.

Finally, for true Alice-Through-The-Looking-Glass craziness, nothing beats the sheer lunacy of current airport security. In Europe – especially mainland, they forget that we are guests, passengers, paying customers, and not inmates.

Every single airport has a different set of rules.

Laptop in, laptop out. Liquids ok, not ok. Shoes on? Shoes off? Belt?

When is a jacket not a jacket? When it is a cardigan apparently. At least in London where you can keep it on. But not in Vienna where they are convinced you can hide a grenade launcher in it. In Frankfurt I was almost arrested for reminding the guy to say “please” when barking orders to “stand there!”

Taking a picnic to Finland? Do not. My M&S Potato Salad in an unopened clear plastic container was carried perfectly ok in the morning from London to Helsinki in my carry-on but confiscated in Helsinki when returning the same afternoon on the same airline. Clearly the Finns think that potato salad

poses a serious threat to the traveling public—or the guy was hungry.

To be fair these inconsistencies are pretty universal. Except of course in the U.S., where TSA have the misery factor honed to a fine art through almost every port.

So yes, let us celebrate the deserving winners of awards and indeed all of us who strive to create a quality and enjoyable experience for the traveling public. But, please, can we try and keep it the same?