

Jeremy's World: The unaligned alliance



An airline loyalty card

In a fire, there are two things I would save. Obviously, the current Mrs. C is absolutely at the top of the list, closely followed by my Lifetime Platinum card from American Airlines, the reward for 10 years of transiting through U.S. airports.

It is a shame they do not issue plastic cards anymore. They are so much more convenient than some labyrinthine app to prove status and gain lounge access.

An alliance has to be a good thing, surely? So, when is an alliance not an alliance? Well, it seems, when it is an airline alliance. Whether craftily marketed as a Sky Team or an ambitious Oneworld or an astrological Star Alliance, the truth is that, despite bold promises, the airlines are far from being aligned.

At FTE APEX Asia Expo in Singapore a few years ago, The CEOs of Star Alliance and Oneworld told us how a seamless utopian experience was just around the corner thanks to the airlines' alliances.

They have had ample time to get it done but none of the big promises have come to pass. None.

Disadvantage

What is not working? Let's start with bags. Before alliances existed, you could interline your bag on

un-conjoined tickets at check-in for multi-stop journeys regardless of carrier.

Now, if all your sectors are in the alliance, they will interline the bag on un-conjoined tickets if you are lucky. But not always. From Asia to Europe and beyond I have never had a problem. Coming back the other way, always a problem.

How about purchasing extras? This is revenue so you would think they would have a seamless system for extracting cash, but no.

I booked a flight from Malaysia to Finland using Qatar Airway's site. It involved three stops. Qatar selected three Oneworld carriers for the return trip, Qatar Airways, Finnair and Malaysia Airlines.

I wanted to buy extra baggage on one of the sectors, but you just cannot! Their system says it is impossible to purchase extra baggage on a non-QR sector. Worse still, you cannot do it via the actual airline flying the sector either.

You can however select seats and upgrade across airlines. It was bizarrely cheaper to buy premium seats on a Malaysia Airlines aircraft via Qatar's website than directly with Malaysia Airlines.

Checking in is another minefield. If your first flight of a trip is on a codeshare, then you cannot check in online in advance. You have to wait until you are at the airport.

These "alliances" do not share IT platforms so a Finnair flight may have a QR flight number because the fare was purchased from Qatar but you cannot check-in at a Qatar counter. Or any other on the alliance's members. Or online.

You can preorder a meal, but you cannot buy a bag. You can select a seat, but you cannot check in. You can change the itinerary, but not if you have mixed airlines.

Miles and less

The other main selling point for the alliance is the loyalty schemes sharing. The Ts and Cs are unnecessarily complex. You never know exactly what you'll get until you complete the journey.

Then there's the difference between "status" miles and spendable miles. If this was a true "alliance" then all earned miles should be classed as status earners regardless of which airline you use. To make it easy, alliances have universal status levels. Oneworld has Ruby, Sapphire and Emerald and its members tiers all fit into one of these three. So if you fly business class on Japan Airlines but hold British Airways membership, why would these not be counted as status earners?

Spending your miles is another challenge. With the exception of American's AAdvantage and its flight planning system using miles which is amazingly efficient, most are not.

But at least they are more efficient than when you want to buy a ticket. Alliance airlines fail to recognize airline partners when searching for journeys unless there is an agreed codeshare on specific routes. If you try and book a flight using miles PEN to HKT to LHR to HEL to OUL, it finds a number of options.

Uncheck the "use miles" box so you pay for it—it cannot. Vietnam Airlines fails to offer any other SkyTeam option on any journey that are not pre-agreed codeshares.

Surely, should this not be the most powerful advantage and convenience of an alliance?

Lost in space

If you try and book a route using the alliance's own websites, it is worse. They do not even recognize their own member airlines!

Do not believe me? Try this: Go to the Oneworld or Star Alliance websites and put in Penang, Malaysia to Oulu, Finland. Both sites say "no flights" despite being served by multiple members of the alliances.

SkyTeam is no better. Try Danang, Vietnam, to Birmingham, U.K. (BHX). Again, "No Flights."

Not true. You can go Vietnam Airlines to Singapore, KLM to Amsterdam then BHX. Easy.

What is the point of an Alliance if it cannot do that?

Ultimately, the big three alliances are great marketing but fail to deliver on many levels. There are a few handy perks-shared lounges being probably the most useful. And I have yet to find any two airline apps that share information of any real convenience. If you have got one of those handy plastic cards, hang on to it. It is the one thing they did get right. Beyond that, they have a very long way to go to be anything close to an alliance.