

THE MIDDLE SEAT

Imagine Not Hating Flying Coach

Some airlines are finally paying attention to fliers beyond the high rollers in first and business class; the question is whether it lasts



ILLUSTRATION: JON KRAUSE



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After decades of cuts and squeezes, improvements are actually creeping back into the coach cabin at some airlines.

Does this mean coach passengers can expect more widespread relief? Maybe.

Delta Air Lines is launching a significant upgrade to coach meal service on long international flights on Nov. 5. Passengers in the back of the plane will get free welcome cocktails, hot towels, printed menus, place mats, a choice of appetizers and separate dessert service. Portions will be bigger, too.

“We have not changed our service in 20 years in the main cabin. This is just a glaring opportunity for us,” says Allison Ausband, Delta’s senior vice president of in-flight service.

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Airlines spent years competing mostly for high-fare customers, pouring money into premium seats, duvets, good meals and wine and fancy airport clubs. Coach was about little more than cheap fares and shoehorning more people into the same space.

Now Delta thinks upgrading coach can provide a competitive advantage over crummier offerings at competitors. The new food service will cost the company more—Delta isn’t saying how much. The airline does say it’s spending \$1 billion overall on improving the customer experience, including in-flight entertainment screens and other amenities.

The push to beat competitors, not just match them, began at Delta several years ago when the airline decided that reliability could be a competitive edge. Delta sharply reduced cancellations and found ways to run closer to on-time.



Next month Delta will begin offering international passengers a free welcome drink, such as these Bellinis. The airline says this will mark its first big upgrade for coach service in 20 years. **PHOTO: DELTA AIR LINES**

It does appear to be paying off. In the first half of 2019, the amount passengers paid, on average, to fly one mile on Delta was almost 9% higher than United's and 2% higher than American's, according to the airlines' earnings statements. Delta's profit in that period was almost as much as United and American earned combined. Delta earned more than American and United combined in 2018.

Like Delta, JetBlue is trying to capitalize on traveler unhappiness with economy-class service with a new ad campaign bashing cheap airline service. The new ads end with a tagline, "Just alright doesn't fly here."

JetBlue launched with a strategy of giving coach passengers better legroom, free in-flight television and tastier snacks. It now offers free high-speed Wi-Fi ahead of competitors.

The changes put pressure on competitors and may well force some to upgrade their own offerings. The improvements could also evaporate if the economy sours.

Delta has refrained from much of the seat-row shrinkage in coach that other airlines have pushed. Most Delta coach seats are in rows 31 inches deep, with a few laid out at 30 inches of space, including the seat. American and United have gone to 30 inches as their new standard. On a Boeing 737-800, Delta has 160 seats. American is now putting 172 seats into the same airplane and United 166.

Delta also has refrained from putting skinnier coach seats in its Boeing 777s, a long-flight workhorse. United, American and several other carriers around the world have put 10 seats, 17 inches wide, in coach rows on the 777. Delta has stuck with nine seats abreast, each 18 inches wide.



No more TV dinner compartment trays. Coach passengers on long Delta international flights will get place mats, serving plates and multiple options for both appetizer and entree. PHOTO: DELTA AIR LINES

Airline treatment of coach passengers has historically oscillated between tight and terrible, following economic trends. In 2000, American took seats out of its coach cabins and thought “More Room in Coach” would drive higher demand at higher prices. That went out the window after the 2001 downturn. So did free hot meals on domestic flights.

But with a sustained period of strong profitability, the pendulum has finally started swinging back. Hot competition for passengers in transcontinental markets, primarily flights from New York to Los Angeles and San Francisco, has brought a return to meal service in coach on those flights.

Wi-Fi service on planes has improved. Multiple airlines now offer free live television on domestic flights and free mobile messaging. Free Wi-Fi is likely in the next couple of years.

To be sure, the domestic U.S. market is largely saturated and big airlines face widespread low-fare competition, making carriers reluctant to invest in better coach service and reduce profitability. The top concern for many travelers is price, and airlines argue cheap service creates cheap tickets.

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What improvement would you most like to see to the main cabin? Or are low prices your highest priority? Join the conversation below.

But Delta says on long-haul international routes, service matters more to customers and U.S. airlines face competition from foreign carriers that haven’t downgraded their coach offering so harshly.

“The biggest opportunity we have is in the international marketplace,” Delta’s Ms. Ausband says.

Development of the new international meal service, which will happen on all flights at least 6½ hours long, started with a group of 24 flight attendants brainstorming new ways to do coach meals with teams of experts in food and beverage, purchasing and supply, ergonomics and maintenance.

Their charge: Design an experience that enables hospitality in the main cabin. Prototypes were tested on 750 flights, all out of Portland, Ore., to Tokyo, Amsterdam and London. The 120 flight attendants based in Portland were trained on changes and provided critical feedback.

Some of the testing was aimed at making service easier for flight attendants. The new service reduces the number of times they bend over by putting more hot items on top of serving carts in a

warming box. It also eliminates heavy trays delivered to tray tables. Passengers get a place mat, a platter and plated food items placed on the platter.

It isn't just the food that's changing. Delta tested 10 different tongs to find one that was easy enough to close and had the right teeth for grabbing bread and hot towels.

Some of the testing focused on the speed of service—a major issue for passengers who want to eat quickly on evening departures to Europe and maximize sleep.

Initial tests used a cart to deliver Bellinis, but that turned out to be too slow. Now, welcome drinks are served from trays. The original design also called for serving appetizers, then returning with dinner service. But in tests on the ground, that took too long. Now carts are loaded with selections of appetizers and entrees. The courses are served at the same time.

Ms. Ausband says the testing showed a separate dessert service is a particular hit with customers.

Another surprise: flight attendants handing out chocolates in the main cabin near the end of a long flight. "It's not about the chocolate," she says. "It's about the flight attendant turning around and thanking customers."

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