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Airlines Promise: It Will Get Better

They say passengers can expect smoother check-ins and more comfortable flights. We'll have to see.

By PETER SANDERS

Air travelers have grown so accustomed to settling for less and putting up with more that many have to be wondering: Will this ever get better?

Journal Report

Industry officials say some things will—and soon. "The changes are happening so rapidly," says Russ Lemieux, executive director of the Airline Passenger Experience Association, a Washington-based trade group.

Passengers who have come to dread the check-in delays, cramped cabins and lack of amenities that characterize so many flights finally have something to look forward to on a number of fronts.

Among the highlights: The check-in process is becoming ever simpler as airlines discover new applications for information technology. New planes coming into service are designed not only to make passengers more comfortable during flights but also to make them feel better afterward. And airlines continue to look for ways to keep passengers better entertained and allow them more choices during flights.

Of course, you can't have everything. As airlines continue to grapple with economic uncertainty and high fuel prices, planes are likely to remain full in many cases because of cutbacks in the number of flights, and passengers will still have to pay extra for many of the available amenities. And there's no end in sight to the hassle of rigorous security checks.

But at least there are some improvements emerging, according to the airlines. Here's a look at some of what they say passengers can expect.

At the Airport

Information technology already has helped make life easier for travelers at the airport, before they board their plane. Many airlines now can deliver boarding passes to passengers' smartphones or other hand-held devices. But Qantas Airways Ltd. has gone a couple of steps further with a pilot program in place for domestic flights at four airports in Australia.

Change in the Air

See the economy cabin in the Airbus A350 and some of the amenities the maker hopes will improve the flying experience.



Airbus

- Private mini-suites in first class
- Wider cabin for more shoulder room
- Programmable LED lighting to reduce jet lag
- Crew rest areas overhead to make more space for passengers
- Improved air-filtration systems
- Larger overhead bins

The program allows travelers to check in in seconds at a kiosk that reads an RFID, or radio-frequency identification, chip in their frequent-flier card. At that moment, flight details, including a gate number, are sent to the traveler's smartphone. At the gate, passengers can simply have their card scanned again and board the plane.

The program saves travelers the few minutes it takes to generate an electronic boarding pass by checking in online. But it has an additional element that can save much more time for those with luggage to check. Before they arrive at the airport, travelers are given luggage tags with RFID chips, so that they can leave their bags at a luggage-drop kiosk where they are scanned automatically, rather than wait in line to have someone take the bags and attach tags.

In another step forward on the luggage front, Delta Air Lines Inc. last month unveiled a program designed to ease passengers' minds about the possibility of their luggage being lost. It enables them to track their

bags from the moment they're checked until they are picked up at the destination. And, of course, if the bags are mislaid, the passenger will at least know where they are.

Farther down the line, technology will emerge to manage every aspect of a trip, from door to door, says Brian O'Rourke, who leads the global airline team at International Business Machines Corp., which is working with Qantas on its RFID technology. "In a decade or two, there will be smart analytics around your travel itinerary that will do everything from recommending the best transport options to and from the airport to being able to update the airline, the driver, the hotelier and the rail company on the status of your flight and other travel," he says.

In The Air

Today, if passengers aren't totally drained by the airport experience, the flight often finishes the job. Aside from the discomfort caused by cramped cabins, there is the sluggish feeling induced by many flights. On trips that cross several time zones, that feeling is due in part to simple jetlag. But flights of any length can be tiring in part because of the environment inside a plane, where the atmosphere is relatively dry and the air pressure is akin to mountain altitudes.

A new generation of planes—including jets from Airbus and Bombardier Inc. and led by Boeing Co.'s 787 Dreamliner, which is slated to enter service with Japan's All Nippon Airways Co. sometime this summer—promises to offer passengers a less taxing environment. "Physically, people will feel better when they leave our 787," says Kent Craver, regional director for passenger satisfaction and revenue at Boeing.

The plane is built largely with high-tech, carbon-fiber composite material in place of metals. The material allows air pressure to be set at the equivalent of a lower altitude than on current planes and the humidity to be set higher, making passengers more comfortable. Today's commercial jets typically simulate an altitude of about 8,000 feet in the cabin. The Dreamliner, Boeing says, can bring that down to as low as 2,000 feet.

The Dreamliner's windows are another feature designed to give passengers a more pleasant ride. The windows will be the largest on any commercial jet, allowing more natural light to enter the cabin. But they also will allow individual passengers greater control over how much outside light enters their area. The traditional pull-down shades have been replaced by a passenger-controlled button at the base of each window that darkens or lightens the window. Flight attendants will be able to take control of all windows in situations where they want everyone to have a clear view, such as landings and emergencies.

Amenities

Airlines and airplane manufacturers are also focusing on giving passengers more space and a greater sense of privacy, and on offering them more choices in how they spend their time aloft.

The A350, being developed by Airbus, a unit of European Aeronautic Defence & Space Co., incorporates many of the features airlines are planning to provide or already are starting to offer. It will offer private suites in first class, wider seats throughout the plane, and overhead rest areas for the crew to open up more space for the passengers. It will also feature an improved air-filtration system and an LED lighting scheme that can be programmed to help fight the effects of jet lag, as well as larger overhead storage bins.

The A350 is about two years away from entering service. Meanwhile, Airbus's A380 jumbo jet, still a relative newcomer, is showing up on a growing number of routes. The A380 offers several improvements from older aircraft for all passengers, including wider seats and a quieter ride. But the plane's biggest advantage is its size, which allows airlines, especially those serving lucrative markets in Asia and the Middle East, to get creative with premium-class offerings. Among the perks being offered by various airlines: multiple bars, full-size showers and bathrooms big enough to include a changing area.

All of that comes at a steep ticket price, of course. But there is something of a trickle-down effect, according to James Boyd, a spokesman for Singapore Airlines. "The private cabin in the nose of the A380 with a double sliding door has helped us with the exploration of the concept of privacy," he says. "We take that concept and start to see things like adjustable winglets on the headrests in economy, which supports your head and gives you a feeling of separation from your neighbor."

Air New Zealand is among those leading the movement toward a greater sense of privacy for passengers. It recently introduced new cabin features across all three of its classes—business, premium economy and economy. To start, the new cabins are being introduced on the airline's Boeing 777 wide-body jets.

Business-class fliers have their own mini-cubicle with a seat that adjusts to lie fully flat. New premium-economy rows feature seats angled away from each other to give more of a feeling of personal space.

And to much fanfare came the SkyCouch in economy class. It's a row of three seats that can be converted to a futon-like arrangement—the armrests can be stowed and solid footrests can be pulled up to the level of the seat, to create a flat cushion that fills the row. The airline suggests the SkyCouch for couples who want extra room or for adults traveling with children. Of course the price per passenger is higher if the space is used by fewer than three people.

U.S. carrier Virgin America is among the leaders in a movement to offer passengers more flexibility in how they use their time on board. The airline's seatback entertainment consoles offer a broader variety of TV, movies and music than most, but the real innovation is that they also allow passengers to order food and drink at almost any point during a flight.

Virgin also provides in-flight Wi-Fi to make it easier for people to work, communicate and find their own entertainment. Passengers still can't perform multiple tasks simultaneously on their devices or stream video as smoothly as they can on the ground, but they can expect steady improvement in this area as the airlines and Internet service providers work together to improve ground-to-air service.

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