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CABIN UPGRADES IN THE AIR AS AIRLINES TAKE ECONOMY CLASS ACTION

WOMEN-only toilets, sky nannies and meals designed by celebrity chefs are among the remedies airlines are developing to cure the common economy class complaints.

Flight Centre Limited global executive general manager of marketing Colin Bowman said the in-flight revolution that had delivered double beds, shower spas and other innovations to premium customers was spreading to the back of the plane.

“In recent years, we have seen radical changes in air travel as new airlines have emerged and as established carriers have developed new facilities and features to differentiate their services,” Mr Bowman said.

“Already, we have seen significant improvements in first and business class cabins and the development of a popular new travel option, premium economy, to bridge the gap between the front and back of the plane.

“When it comes to the economy class cabin, airlines are also making changes.

“Some carriers are opting for a no frills offering, while others are upgrading by incorporating features that alleviate concerns that passengers sometimes voice during long-haul flights.

“This includes more legroom, better cuisine and extra space for carry-on luggage.”

Flight Centre has scanned the skies and found a host of new initiatives that airlines have adopted to solve enhance the in-flight experience for economy class travellers.

1. More legroom

Naturally, there’s a temptation for airlines to cram as many paying passengers as possible into the economy class cabin.

Luckily, airlines are starting to offer alternatives for long-limbed customers and those who simply want to stretch out a little further during their journeys. Options include exit row seats and extra legroom seats in dedicated sections within the economy class cabin.

American Airlines is one of the latest airlines to opt for the latter strategy and will introduce a Main Cabin Extra feature that offers passengers an additional “four to six inches” of legroom.

2. The Meal High Club

The standard of in-flight cuisine has long been a talking point for travellers.

The good news is that airlines are appealing to travellers' tastebuds by serving up improved air "fare" in the form of offerings designed by famous chefs and restaurateurs.

Virgin's on-board menu was designed by leading Australian chef Luke Mangan, while Neil Perry designed Qantas's in-flight and lounge menu.

Gordon Ramsay and Australia's Matthew Moran are part of Singapore Airlines' culinary panel, along with French master chef Georges Blanc.

3. Not enough room for hand luggage

Today's travellers are cramming more into carry-on bags to avoid checked luggage fees, reduce the risk of luggage loss or to simply allow for a faster airport getaway.

This means it's becoming harder to find space in the humble overhead locker.

To solve the problem, several American airlines, including United and Delta, recently announced plans to introduce larger or upgraded luggage bins.

4. Long toilet queues

Ryanair, the Irish-based airline that once contemplated charging passengers for in-flight bathroom use (a "user pees" system), made headlines recently when it said it was considering removing all but one of the toilets on each of its planes to allow more seats to be fitted.

Thankfully, other airlines are taking the opposite approach.

Several Asian carriers, including Korean Air and All Nippon, have now introduced women-only toilets on some services.

Further changes could be on the way, with a German design company reportedly developing plans for in-flight urinals.

5. The noisy neighbour

As far as we're aware, no airline has yet been able to develop a solution for silencing the overly chatty economy class neighbour.

Quiet zones on planes could, however, be a feature of future air travel.

In interviews last year, Airbus's engineering chief outlined a cabin of the future design that offered personalised zones, which would effectively separate travellers who wanted to socialise from those who wanted to relax.

6. Help with the kids

Travelling with kids is not always easy – for parents or for other travellers.

Gulf Air now offers an innovative Sky Nanny service "to help families travelling with children - and those passengers who aren't".

The free service is available in some lounges and on various long haul routes and is designed to help families board and disembark, give parents a break during a flight and generally provide a watchful eye on the little ones.

7. Dinner's on me – literally

If you're sick of the neighbour in front unexpectedly dropping in for dinner – courtesy of a poorly-timed seat recline - consider flying Cathay Pacific.

Cathay's economy seats recline within a protective shell that doesn't move, thereby preserving your personal space at all times.

8. Check-out of check-in queues

In the new age of air travel, chances are you won't have to waste hours waiting in the check-in queue at the airport.

Airlines now commonly offer alternatives, including curbside or city centre check-in.

Airlines have also been quick to capitalise on the popularity of smart phones, with many now allowing travellers to access boarding passes from blackberries, I-phones and other devices.

Qantas has been at the forefront of developments and has pioneered a new check-in system that eliminates the need for printed documents.

New Qantas cards with intelligent Q chips have been sent to the airline's Platinum, Gold and Silver Frequent Flyer members. To check-in, travellers simply touch the cards at Q Card Readers.

9. Lost luggage

If you lost a suitcase in your travels, you're not alone.

A Flight Centre analysis of the 2011 Air Transport Industry (ATI) Baggage Report found that more than 29million items of luggage - an average of 80,657 items per day – were delayed, damaged or lost globally during 2010.

While this represents about one lost item for every 100 passengers, airlines are working to lower the odds of luggage loss.

Several carriers now offer services that allow you to send your luggage to your destination in advance, thereby avoiding the luggage carousel lottery.

For example, United Airlines customers now have access to a door-to-door luggage service, which covers 48 states in continental USA.

In Australia, Qantas and Virgin both offer freight services.

10. Looking for in-flight advice? Ask your concierge

On various routes, Air New Zealand offers an International Airline Concierge service to help travellers who want expert advice on must see sights, activities and other travel arrangements.

11. Spoiled for choice with entertainment options

And finally ... if your biggest in-flight gripe is simply not being able to decide on a game or a movie from the widening range of in-flight entertainment options, you may want to fly Qatar Airways.

The Doha-based airline, which flies to Melbourne and will launch Perth services later this year, will offer enhanced in-flight entertainment, featuring award-winning touch screen Android technology, aboard its 787 Dreamliner aircraft.

According to the airline, the touch-screen control unit will have a unique dual screen interface that will allow passengers to play games on their handheld device while enjoying a movie on their personal screen.

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