

Airlines



raise their game

Your own private apartment, a butler, an on-board shower, push-button window blinds and a bar to mingle in. **YVONNE GORDON** looks at how the business of air travel is getting even more luxurious.

Picture this. You're lying in bed, snuggled up with a duvet and pillow and you have a choice of 1,000 hours of movies and entertainment channels on the flat screen in front of you. You can order food any time you like, from a menu prepared by a Michelin-starred chef, and dine with a companion.

After dinner, before turning out the light, pressing a button to close the blinds, and settling down for a sleep on the flat bed, you select a time to be woken up with a hot breakfast. At your destination, you have a shower and breakfast while your clothes are being pressed in the arrivals suite.

This isn't a dream about air travel, or the ultimate in luxury in first class, this is the reality of business class on many long-haul flights today. With increased competition, airlines are investing time and money to attract the lucrative business class passenger by adding innovations both on the ground and in the air.

'A private cocoon in the sky' is how Air France describes business class. The airline is transforming its business and first class offerings, remodelling its business class seat to offer more privacy and comfort. It describes the horizontal bed, with its soft duvet and feather down

pillow, as 'a bed worthy of the greatest hotels and comfort identical to a night spent at home.' There's also cuisine created by Michelin-starred chefs like Michel Roth and Guy Martin and even the tableware is designer. There are charging points, a 16-inch screen, 1,000 hours of entertainment programming and noise-reduction headphones.

Air France, which flies to more than 100 destinations from its hub in Paris (there are five daily Dublin-Paris connections with partner CityJet), and is part of the Air France KLM Group, is installing 2,102 of these business class seats on 44 Boeing 777 aircraft, before summer 2016. It has also added four La Premiere suites to each flight – individual first-class suites with leather-effect walls and woven tweed seats. Window blinds are closed at the flick of a switch, lighting can be adjusted, there's a private wardrobe and menus include champagne and caviar.

Another innovation, as part of a €60m investment in innovative tools at the airport, is the Air France App for Apple Watch. The passenger can check flight and airport information and scan a boarding pass, all from their watch. In the future, the watch will vibrate if there's a change of departure time or boarding gate.



Closer to home, Aer Lingus has also reinvented its business class offering, with its new business class experience for transatlantic flights launched in March of this year. Due to the popularity of business class, it has also put in more business class seats on long haul fleets.

The new business class seat turns into a flat 6'6" bed, one of the longest in the air. The entertainment system includes new release movies and box sets and is 'gate-to-gate' so you can watch as soon as you board. Aer Lingus business class customers already enjoy priority check-in, fast track security lanes and access to a business lounge. In the new JFK lounge and at Boston, business class customers can pre-dine at the airport, so they can sleep for as long as possible on the flight.

On board, there is free Wi-Fi, power points, more work space and more storage. On arrival in Dublin, the new arrivals lounge has an area to shower and steam clothes, as well as coffee and croissants, handy if you're going straight in to the office.



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British Airways was the first airline to launch fully flat beds in first class back in 1996 and in business class in 2001. As well as priority check-in and fast-track security, Club World passengers (long-haul business class) enjoy private lounges with luxurious spa facilities – the Galleries lounge at Heathrow Terminal 5 has a range of food options and an Elemis spa. On board, there's a full entertainment system, power supplies and three-course meals. The 'Sleeper Service' on some routes offers customers the ability to sleep for as long as possible, with a night-cap just after boarding and a quick breakfast prior to arrival.

For those that like the best in life and travel in first class, BA's first class includes the Quintessentially lifestyle concierge service. There's a door-to-door baggage service, pre-flight dining and the Concorde Room Lounge at Heathrow Terminal 5, which has luxurious furniture, chandeliers and art. There are private booths with waiter service and cabanas with a bed and en-suite bathroom.

Features on board include a 6'6" bed with its own private suite, a wardrobe, electronic blinds, à la carte dining, pyjamas and a turn-down service. British Airways is currently working on the next generation of the first class cabin for the new Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner later this year (details are still under wraps).

So why are all the airlines upgrading? In part it is due to the competition from airlines like Etihad Airways and Emirates, who are both known for their outstanding hospitality and passenger comfort. Etihad Airways, the national airline of the UAE, has won World's Leading Airline five times at the World Travel Awards since it started in 2003. In Ireland, the airline has won the Best Business Class Airline title consecutively since 2008 at the Irish Travel Trade News Awards.



For Etihad passengers, the luxury starts at the airport lounge in Dublin's T2. There's a state-of-the-art business centre as well as shower rooms, a library of books, magazines and newspapers, an à la carte menu and buffet. Pearl Business Class guests enjoy a chauffeur service.

The most exciting offering, launched late last year on its Airbus A380 and Boeing B787 Dreamliner aircraft, is The Residence, dubbed the world's most luxurious living space in the air (apart from a private jet of course). This upper-deck cabin on the A380 has a living room, separate double bedroom and en-suite shower. Guests in The Residence, currently available on the Heathrow-Abu Dhabi and Abu Dhabi-New York routes, also have a personal butler. On Etihad's B787, the First Apartments private suites have a separate reclining lounge seat and full-length bed, as well as a mini-bar, vanity unit and wardrobe. Etihad's new cabins and service follow its pledge to transform air travel and make every guest journey a remarkable one.

Emirates, the other UAE flag-carrier, also has a luxury business class option, with flatbed seats, in-seat power and a side workspace. Business class customers enjoy a gourmet menu served on Royal Doulton bone china plates, plus a personal mini bar.

In first class, you can have a mid-flight shower or close the door of your own private suite. First class customers can expect Dom Perignon champagne or have signature cocktails in the A380 Onboard Lounge. There's a chauffeur service and the airport lounges offer everything from gourmet buffets to spa treatments.

Singapore Airlines, another of the world's leading airlines (which flies from London) debuted new first and business class cabin products in 2013 after two years of research and a \$150m investment. It launched these on US flights in March of this year and is now rolling

them out to the complete B777-300ER aircraft fleet. Nice touches in first class include a stationary drawer with writing paper and pens, and a 35-inch wide seat and in-seat telephones. Tableware, pyjamas and even the blankets are by Givenchy.

Business class travel is more expensive than economy – however if you're working, getting that vital night's sleep before a meeting or before your return to the office, is worth the investment. Many companies don't allow their employees to travel economy if the flight is more than five hours long. This is more than just a perk, it makes sure that the person representing the company is fresh at the destination when they arrive, and is not meeting clients or doing big deals on a lack of sleep.

US travel expert Johnny Jet, who flies 150,000 miles a year, around 50 per cent of it in business class, says that airlines are offering more amenities and better food to business class travellers, although economy class may be suffering as a result: "Without a doubt airlines are stepping up their game to cater to high-paying premium passengers. Unfortunately, economy class passengers are finding less legroom and more slimline seats which have less cushioning. But if you can make your way into the premium cabins you will be quite impressed," he says.

With the growth in demand for business class, even Ryanair, which recognises that 25 per cent of its customers are travelling on business, now has a business offering. The Business Plus package (from €69.99), offers flexibility on ticket changes, 20kg bag allowance, fast-track airport security at selected airports, priority boarding and premium (but not bigger) seats. It's not luxury, but it makes life easier for business travel at the budget end of the market. ■