



Travel Feature

Best First Class 2006

Sophia Banay, 11.09.06, 12:01 AM ET

Silk pajamas, private spas, designer amenities and restaurant-quality food--these days flying first class is a lot like a night at your favorite resort. The major difference (other than jet lag): price.

This year, Cathay Pacific, the top-rated first class carrier on our annual list of the Best First Class Airlines, celebrated its 60th birthday. To mark the occasion, the airline announced a series of upgrades, including bigger television screens, more work space and a new, ergonomically-tested first class seat with massage capability that gently converts to a chaise lounge as well as a totally flat bed.

On Malaysia Airlines, passengers in the U.K. and France are ferried to the airport via helicopter (passengers in other countries make do with a limo). On board, food is served with silver forks and knives, Italian glassware and china; champagne, liquor and vintage wine accompany each meal.

And at British Airways, the design of the newly introduced first class cabin was based on the interior of a Rolls Royce, with Connolly leather, faux walnut wood, rich fabrics and a deep, soothing color palette. At London's Heathrow and New York's John F. Kennedy airports, BA also provides a complimentary Molton Brown Spa, and onboard catering includes spa cuisine from Thailand's Chiva Som resort.

"We get celebrity chefs from around the world to help us identify the food trends happening in restaurants. Then we make it happen in the plane," says James Boyd, a representative for Singapore Airlines, which just spent \$360 million upgrading cabins across all classes of service. "Same thing with the wine experts, who tell us where wine is going. Our turndown service for first class looks like the service you'd expect to have at a five-star hotel. We're taking a page from how our customers live their lives."

Of course, all that pampering comes at a price. A round-trip first class ticket from London to Hong Kong on Cathay Pacific costs \$12,373, and New York to Hong Kong rings in at almost \$16,000. On Malaysia Airlines, an Los Angeles to Kuala Lumpur round-trip first class ticket is \$8,800; Bangkok can be almost \$10,000.

"The carriers make a lot of money on people who pay premium fares," says **Bob Harrell**, president of New York City-based aviation industry consulting firm **Harrell Associates**. "There's a lot of competition in the back of the airplane, but the fares are so dramatically higher in the front of the plane that they have incredible margins for carriage."

Of course, there are plenty of people sitting in first class who didn't pay \$10,000 to be there.

"It's either upgrades or employees," says Harrell. "They'd never displace a guy who wants to pay \$10,000, but if a seat's available, it goes to a crew member," like a deadheading pilot.

If you don't work for an airline, your best bet to travel first class is to fly--a lot. Most airline rewards programs offer upgrades for their top flyers, those in their Platinum, Diamond or Gold categories, says Harrell. "These people get upgrades routinely, or free tickets or rewards miles if they can't get an upgrade."

To compile our list, we worked with **Skytrax**, a U.K.-based airline and airport quality ranking firm, which sent 16 auditors into the field for six months to assess the 36 carriers who offer first class service on their international, long-haul routes. Skytrax grades each airline across a giant matrix on over 400 criteria, including efficiency of the check-in process, the quality of the onboard entertainment and the temperature of the meal service entrée when it is served.

One thing that hasn't changed from last year's list is that the top ten is dominated by Asia- and Middle East-based airlines. Not a single U.S.-based carrier made the top ten.

"Amongst the Middle Eastern carriers, the majority have a largely Asian proportion of front-line staff in customer service roles," **Peter Miller**, who administers Skytrax's annual study, writes in an e-mail. "The Asian service culture is quite simply a whole lot better than that which we have here in Europe or that which you have in the U.S."

So which airlines do provide the most luxurious first class service? We've done the legwork to find out. Your job? Paying for it.