COMPARING EMIRATES, LUFTHANSA, UNITED AIRLINES BUSINESS CLASS THERE'S A CLEAR WINNER

News / Airlines

You don't often get the opportunity to sample business class in three of the world's top airlines in the space of a few days, but my recent trip to Venezuela (three days in the air for two on the ground) gave me the perfect chance to assess standards of comfort, service and entertainment in Emirates, Lufthansa and United Airlines.

The result was a close-run thing between Dubai and Germany. No surprises there, I suppose. But, even though it's now a standard refrain of international air travellers, I was shocked at how unbelievably bad American premium airline service has become.

I kept a contemporaneous record, rating each leg of the round-trip out of a maximum 10 marks for each of three categories: seat, in-flight service and entertainment, giving a possible total of 30.

I did not take ticket pricing into account for the very good reason that somebody else was paying.

The first leg – seven hours from Dubai to Frankfurt on Emirates – was reassuringly fam-i-liar: a

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Boeing 777 with side-by-side seats and all the usual Emirates comforts. The seat next to me was empty, making a big difference.

My marking was rigorous. I awarded the flight 19 points out of a possible 30.

Next was the 11-hour flight to Caracas on board a Lufthansa Airbus A340. The cabin and seat appeared spartan in comparison with Emirates, with the same side-by-side arrangement, but this was more than compensated for by some real German “technik”: a sophisticated entertainment system with Bose headphones, Samsonite toiletry bags, excellent food and drink served up by charmingly efficient cabin crew.

I gave Lufthansa 20 out of a possible 30, putting it ahead of Emirates at the halfway stage.

On the return leg came the American experience.

I couldn’t fault the check-in staff at the United desk in Cara-cas for the flight to Houston, Texas. They went out of their way to help me resolve a visa issue that could have blocked my entry to the US. (Did you know you have to have a US visa even for an airside transit in the country? I didn’t, and had to get one online at the last minute.)

But the lovely check-in people were Venezuelan. It was when you got on-board that real American standards of air service hit you.

The seat in the business cabin was perhaps two inches wider than a normal economy seat, and was made of leather, but apart from that there was nothing to justify premium prices. The food was like the service: adequate but cold.

In-flight entertainment was non-existent. When I first sat down I thought there must be a foldaway TV hiding somewhere, because there was nothing on the back of the seat in front of me. I realised eventually there was no TV screen.

Five-and-a-half hours with no movie? Unthinkable, but true. This is how air travel must have been in the bad old days. I gave the experience a miserable seven out of a possible 30.

But at least it made me appreciate the flight from Houston to Dubai all the more. Business class aboard the Emirates A380 is as good as it gets, and I spent the next 14 hours cocooned in my little world – study, dining room, bedroom and cinema rolled into one.

With the usual excellent menu and ICE entertainment system, the flight fully deserved 26 points out of 30.

So Emirates came top with 22.5, averaged over two trips; Lufthansa second with 20; and United eating dust with 7. Pretty conclusive, I think.

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