



THE TRAVEL ADVISER - FLYING WITH PRIVILEGE

News / Airlines



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El Al pilots, whose skills have been honed by years of serving in the IAF, comprise nearly an all-boys club known throughout the world as including the finest pilots in the entire profession.

Cool and calm under all circumstances, with thousands of hours of simulation and real flying time they've mastered hundreds of topics. However, sadly, the vast majority don't speak a word of Spanish.

El Al flight attendants, understanding that the safety and security of their passengers come first, provide a vital role in enhancing the flying experience. They, too, have a rigorous course load designed to equip themselves with every possible scenario. They, too, are not taught a word of Spanish.

El Al markets itself primarily based on the high ranking and responsibility of its employees. Unable

to compete with the fanciest aircraft and unwilling to enter into a price segment with ultra-low-cost carriers, the quality of its staff may be its largest calling card. The colors of the flag, the feeling of safety, direct flights to different destinations and its image as the nation's airline also help to explain why Israeli tourists prefer to fly El Al. They consider it the national, preferred carrier, the undisputed leader in almost every parameter over competing companies.

Survey after survey concludes that the majority of tourists and Israelis choose El Al as the airline they would rather fly between Tel Aviv and the cities the airline serves when taking security issues into consideration.

Unfortunately, due to the avarice of the pilots' union, El Al management has had to make a major policy shift.

It wasn't too long ago that El Al quietly released a statement and soon thereafter removed it from its website, leaving a broken link: "Due to operational constraints, some El Al flights are being operated on leased aircraft of the Spanish Privilege Style Airline."

The list of flights may change. Notification will be sent by text message to passengers whose flight will be on Privilege Style. The in-flight crew is Spanish and food and beverage services will be the same as the service provided by El Al."

Vaya con Dios and so it shall be. These flights started in the summer to European destinations such as London, Paris and Amsterdam as the union refused to budge in their contract negotiations with company management. Nobody dared to speak to the press, but their present employment conditions are some that even Donald Trump himself doesn't enjoy. To add insult to injury, in taking their tepid stance to new heights they've resorted to petty behavior in trying to get management to capitulate.

Flights to and from New York and Brussels were canceled recently, joining other destinations, such as Beijing and Johannesburg. The airline accuses pilots of violating agreements signed with the workers. The company feebly apologized for the inconvenience to passengers and is working to find solutions. The union complained they are being overworked. Sometimes the crews call in sick, other times they state it's a labor dispute, but for over six months this kindergarten behavior has forced El Al to call in the Spanish Armada. Management had little choice but lease these aircraft in the futile hope that the flying public wouldn't notice. They were wrong.

Emotions have erupted on both sides of the Atlantic as the pilots' union realized that Europeans were less concerned about an EU-approved Spanish carrier and has taken the battle to the skies and cities of North America. Boston and Newark are the latest battlegrounds in the pilots' stance against El Al management.

For more than two months, flights to Boston and Newark have been booked as El Al flights, seats assigned, monies exchanged only to suddenly be operated by Privilege Style.

The reality is far more injurious than merely listening to buenas noches from the flight attendants, who have earned an excellent review from the flying public.

Start with the plane itself. The aircraft used by Privilege Style on the Boston flights is a former Boeing 767 LOT Polish aircraft that was retired by them a few years ago. Two glaring omissions: It has no seatback entertainment and no economy plus section.

On the flights between JFK and Newark, the Spaniards have leased a Boeing 777 that was retired from Asiana Airlines. It too has no economy plus section, and a different seating configuration lacking in power plugs. In fact, some fliers complain the planes are so old that they have ashtrays in the seat rests dating back to the time when smoking was permitted on planes.

Americans have been the most vociferous writing letters to this paper bemoaning the flights. They've taken to social media attacking El Al for these flights.

I encourage any readers who have purchased an El Al flight and wound up on a Privilege Style plane to vent your displeasure by sending an email to customer@elal.co.il.

Let's be clear. Under the present arrangement, El Al has no choice but to rely upon the largesse of the Spanish airline. Giving in to the pilots' demands would lead to a quick breakdown of the huge savings it has gained by the dramatic reduction in the price of airline fuel. The customer in-flight experience has been satisfactory. It is the process before they get on the plane that has brought a litany of complaints.

For the last few years, El Al has been promoting premium economy seating on a variety of aircraft, especially to North America. For \$150 in each direction or 300 points from one's El Al frequent-flier account, one can gain access to a bit more leg room, (13 cm.) resulting in a wider pitch of your seat and the pleasure of not having the seat tray of the seat in front of you coming perilously close to your body. In reality, it makes a tidy amount from the premium economy product, so when they are forced to contact passengers to tell them that it no longer is an option, one would think it would be more forthcoming, other than offering a full refund.

In fact, while it charges you immediately for seats, the refund takes more than one month to process, leaving a bitter taste. When a large family has purchased tickets and prearranged their seats, one would like to believe that when the aircraft is changed, El Al's personnel would do their best to seat the family together. One would be wrong.

Every so often the airline releases a "Corporate Responsibility Report" to publicize and promote what a wonderful job it does in this sphere.

In their latest report, David Maimon, the president and CEO of El Al, waxes poetic: "We are aware of the effect that aviation has on our environment, as well as the related risks to which airlines are exposed. But where there are risks, there are also opportunities.

"Last but not least – the people of El Al, our human capital and the reason behind our strength. To offer you a more fair, considerate, attentive and pleasant working environment is our privilege and duty," he concludes.

David, I implore you get your head out of the clouds! You have surrounded yourself with too many lepers and leeches, employees whose main interest is their own self-preservation.

You claim weeding out the bad apples is an arduous task, patience must be exercised and in the end an agreement can be made with the pilots' union. El Al has come close several times, only to find the pilots reneging on an agreement. It's time to take a lesson from dozens of other airlines over the last 15 years: Shut it down, tear it up and press reset.

In 2017 El Al is due to begin delivery of new Boeing 787 aircraft. Commonly called Dreamliners, these aircraft will allow El Al to compete head-to-head with the United Airlines and British Airways

of the world.

They'll be able to open up new routes, add new products and boldly go where it has never gone before. This means that if it is ever going to reinvent itself, it is in 2016.

Yes, a shutdown will be costly; it will erode customer loyalty, and of course severely test El Al's fragile financial recovery, but there is no other choice, David.

If you rebuild it, I promise you the customers will come. By nature, the flying public has a short memory.

Whether it takes three weeks or three months to get new contracts in place, the long-term returns will be worth it. The bottom line is that when taking into account risk versus reward, you have to take the risk.

It's simply a privilege that all of us who care deeply about El Al deserve.

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