

# Technology gives fliers more control over their journeys

Speculation about the future of travel tends to focus on how aircraft are evolving to fly faster and carry more passengers in greater comfort, but often ignores the changes happening on the ground.



Advances in technology and composite materials have enabled manufacturers to develop aircraft that are quieter, more fuel efficient and with lower emissions. The A380 superjumbo is an immense engineering achievement, while Boeing's 787 Dreamliner heralds the next generation of commercial aircraft.

Airbus' A380 is one of the quietest aircraft around, so passengers aren't kept awake by the roar of engines throughout the flight and the on-board comfort is further enhanced by one of the most advanced climate control systems on a commercial aircraft.

Boeing's 787 Dreamliner's carbon fibre composite construction means that it can be pressurised more than conventional metal-bodied aircraft and the cabin air doesn't have to be as dry. These environmental factors help reduce the symptoms of long-haul hangover, such as dry nose and throat, parched skin and tiredness.

As well as enabling passengers to fly in more comfort, new aircraft designs have added practical benefits, such as larger overhead storage bins, and have given carriers more flexibility to innovate with the on-board services.

While innovation in aircraft design over the past decade has improved the on-board experience, digital technology is giving customers more control over every aspect of their journey.

## **An array of alternatives**

Today most airline websites, such as ba.com, enable you to search for the most convenient flights or, alternatively, the best value and provide an array of alternatives and breakdown of charges, so you can make an informed choice. You can even pay a nominal amount to hold seats for up to 72 hours.

You can also book car hire, accommodation, pay a discounted rate for excess baggage and even check your destination's weather forecast so you know what to pack.

Best of all is that all this can now also be done from a mobile phone or tablet while on the move, including booking, changing flights on eligible tickets or upgrading cabins.

Since it was launched, well over a million customers have downloaded British Airways' app, which elevates the customer experience to a whole new level. Not only can you check-in using your mobile device, but can also have your boarding pass sent directly to it. Effectively, this means you can get your bag tagged at a fast-bag drop, skip the check-in queues and go straight to security.

"We've got a few things in the pipeline to streamline this process even more," said Edward Frost, British Airways Commercial Manager for South and East Africa.

These include electronic bag tags, which are being trialled at the moment. When you check in you'll be able to store all the relevant information on the tag. At the airport you'll simply place your bag on an automated baggage machine, which is able to read the tag and deliver it to the aircraft.

## **Known customer**

The airline is also pioneering an initiative called 'known customer', which will allow frequent flyers who have been vetted by security services to fast track through security checks.

As well as improving the technology at its customers' fingertips, British Airways has also provided over 2000 iPads to senior cabin crew, loaded with bespoke customer-service software. This enables them to see immediately if a customer has a tight connection, particular preference or has raised a complaint or concern. Prior to take off they can link with colleagues on the ground who can deal with problems or make arrangements while the aircraft is in the air. This was simply impossible in the recent past, when a senior crew member would have to page through reams of paper just to find a customer's name.

"There are two objectives to rolling out technology to customers and crew: it gives our customers more choice and control and enables our crew to offer more insightful, personalised service," said Frost.

This more personalised experience has also been extended to the way the airline interacts with its customers on social media, with South African customers now able to browse a localised Facebook page by selecting their country of origin on the airline's home page. This gives them access to relevant offers, competitions and other information.

"What's really interesting is that we're seeing our African customers enthusiastically adopting mobile technology and, in some cases, starting to leapfrog those in some other markets, who still use the earlier technology," said Frost.

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