



## EQUAL AMONG FIRSTS - FLYING FIRST CLASS WITH BA

Raionmond Mirza

(published in The Sybarite Online Magazine)

“Thanks for warming my nuts.” A public conversation beginning with these words would, expectedly go bad very quickly. Not, however, in British Airways First Class and not when the nuts in question are a sublime mixture of pecans, macadamias, almonds and brazils served (warmed) in porcelain and accompanied by a flute of Jacquart Rose Mosaique NV, and this is just how the service begins.

Flying First Class. This is a standard that is deeply personal because no matter which company claims to deliver it, we all individually have an idea of what it should be and, perhaps more importantly, what it shouldn't. However there's no consensus and the challenge is to deliver broadly the same thing to each person while making it feel individual. Very tricky stuff then to get right especially when considering all that's involved. It's physical. It's an experience. It's an attitude. It's a style and an aesthetic. Fail to deliver on any one of those and the value of the whole crumbles bitterly. Ah, but get them right and people will leave knowing that this is the only way that travel at 40,000 feet should happen and that's what they'll book next time.

The main inflight business of an airline is to keep you as unaware as possible of being higher in the air than any bird, or for that matter, higher than anything else but a space shuttle on its way out of the atmosphere altogether. There are a few tried and tested methods but for anyone who's flown more than once the trick is not to try and impress with grandiosity – a commercial airline will never compete with a hotel or restaurant who have far more space and many more resources at their disposal around the clock. Management can throw any number of staff at a guest and solve most problems with a phone call. Hotel and restaurant lobbies can shout. That's what they're there to do. An airplane must whisper. A few must do the work of many. Refinement, efficiency and subtlety not sheer size must be the strategy. So how did BA do?



The seat and the space around it are well designed. You have arm room, leg room and, nice touch, counter space. Your smart devices can plug in. The screen is large enough and the sound quality on the headphones is as good as its going to get on a plane. Facilities are a step away and yowling, unhappy noises that aren't soothing and luxurious just don't exist – that right there is a selling point.

The proceedings got underway with champagne, snacks, cocktails, hot towel and a gift bag. So far, “so what?”. Many airlines begin with exactly this ritual. Ah but most don't take the time like Deborah Dingo or Maxine Dale to first find out exactly what you like and then offer you several varieties of each and come up with other options besides – juices, cocktails, whiskeys, nibbles from several countries. Nor is it customary on every carrier to get a personal chat with the Cabin Services Director but Sandra Barton (in charge of the well being of a couple of hundred passengers) does exactly this. She can be heard remembering not only what a frequent flyer had last time but wanting to know how they've been since.





We continued onto duck rillete with smoked duck breast, kumquat confit, red currant gel, chestnut and cranberry salad. Coincidentally, we recently had this in a West London Hotel/Club by Marble Arch that shall remain nameless. They should take note. BA did better. The sea bass, however, let the side down as did the Paul Cuvier Sauvignon Blanc 2015. Well served but poorly chosen – both a bit bland for us. Things picked up nicely with the Grand Cru Haut Medoc Chateaux Cantermele 2008 and the salted caramel brownie with profiteroles. The finish line was

crossed in style on platter of Gouda, Lincolnshire Poacher, Wensleydale Blue and Somerset Camembert accompanied by a limited batch single malt Glenlivet (ok a bit common but goes perfectly with the cheeses). This is where the small touches count. The grapes were fresh and chilled. The crackers crisp and new. The linen soft, the cutlery bright and best of all, no request was too big.

Most airlines fail as soon as the main service is done. The crew smiles turn brittle. The response time lags. The unspoken subtext is all but flashed in neon “We’ve done our duty. Can you please go to sleep now. We’d like to be rid of you.” Not so Ann Haswell. She’ll gladly bring you each and every new thing you request and will offer other things you may not have considered. She understands that in her cabin, travellers are constantly zone jumping. Everyone around you may be tired but you’ve just connected from another continent and are five hours behind and nibblish. She’s right there with you and when you’re actually done she’ll ask if she can make your bed. For anyone managing an account, servicing a client, finessing a merger or simply being a parent, this is quality.

Dawn. Having slept more comfortably than on some lumpy hotel beds we arrive at the end of this reverse dining process (begin with dinner and end with breakfast). This too was a test. If ever a service team wants to be rid of guests it’s at the butt end of the working day. The party’s over. The barmaid’s called “Time please.” The OMG- Who’ve-I-been-Dancing-With? lights have come on. What could possibly go right? A fresh fruit plate with kiwi so crisp it could have been plucked seconds before being served and salmon (tough to pull off in a restaurant much less a plane) with hollandaise sauce, asparagus and poached eggs.



How does all this compare to other First Class services? In terms of kit, has BA got the best? It’s good but other airlines have splashed out more on the furnishings. However, has it got the best service? Very likely and that’s an achievement considering they don’t have as much staff as other airlines. This is down to training, experience and each attendant’s desire to do their job in the best way possible. You can buy materials. You can’t buy quality service. You can only hire, train and retain good people. BA’s stalwart, long term crew are just that. They are what makes any class “First”.

Normally, we’d end right there. However, a comparison is worth mentioning because one happened to us straight after getting off this flight and onto the next one. Up to this point it had all been what First Class should be. The next few hours on another airline, let’s just call them “Go Around Indi-a” were the exact opposite. They were a masterclass in everything that any class on any flight should just never be.



From the ground to the air it was an endurance test. Everything was unapologetically late. Everything was flimsy, badly crafted, ill conceived and invidious. Everything was hot when it should have been cold and then vice versa. Everything should have come with a health warning, especially the menu.

The staff were well meaning but began the service by giving the front two rows a miss. No particular reason. They just did. One's blood spent most of the time rushing to the face because it was fleeing a seat designed by puritans who consider cushions a sin.

The crowning moment was realising we'd paid for this jaw dropping marathon of uncaring, offensive, cretinous incompetence and the coup-de-gras was a sign on the pilot's cabin door "Flying is a serious profession, do not carry your worries beyond this point."

So is First Class worth it? Well, have you tried the opposite lately?

