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Airlines Add Service and Amenities to Asian Routes

By PERRY GARFINKEL

Seven hundred years after the Venetian merchant [Marco Polo](#) plied the Silk Road, Western [business travelers](#) are discovering new routes — all involving airlines, of course — to expand trade with the East.

Consider Zhihang Chi, the vice president and general manager for Air China's North America office in El Segundo, Calif., who often takes his own carrier's 13-hour nonstop flight from Los Angeles to Beijing and back.

He does not even need to book a hotel room. He leaves Los Angeles at 1:40 a.m. local time, attends meetings in Beijing over the next 10 hours the next day, leaves Beijing at 9 p.m. and lands back in Los Angeles by 6 p.m. the same day.

Gary Peterson, executive vice president for Protiviti, an audit and risk advisory company, uses United's Circle Pacific program to fly from San Francisco to Sydney, then on to any of several Asian cities, for less than he would pay to fly business class round-trip to Tokyo.

And Ganjun Bagla, a Cerritos, Calif., management consultant and author of "Doing Business in 21st Century India" (Hachette, 2008), usually takes a plane out of Los Angeles to India but now will take a shuttle to San Francisco to fly Jet Airways, the first India-based airline to fly from San Francisco to Mumbai

These business travelers provide a ray of hope for profit in the cloudy airline industry skies.

According to Air Transport Association analyses compiled for The New York Times, 996 nonstop flights a week were scheduled in the third quarter of 2008 from the United States to Asian countries, more than ever before. Los Angeles is the most popular departure city from the United States, with 180 flights a week. Narita Airport in Tokyo is the most frequent destination, with 380 arrivals a week.

[American Airlines](#) reported that revenue for flights to and from Japan and China grew 12.8 percent for the first three months of 2008, greater growth than in any other region. That region also saw the biggest growth in average fares paid, 12.2 percent.

Smaller airlines are also profiting from business travel to [Asia](#). Talon Air, the Long Island-based luxury private jet charter company, showed a 50 percent increase of bookings to Asian cities for each of the last three years, according to its owner, Adam Katz.

Experts attribute this growth to several factors. The economic boom in Asian countries, particularly China and India, translates to more business travel between East and West.

Also, the new bigger planes used for long-haul flights of 12 to 17 hours can carry more fuel, said Mary Tabacchi, a [Cornell University](#) associate professor who has tracked airline trends for 15 years. This eliminates the need for extra landings and takeoffs, which use more fuel.

“Major airlines hemorrhaging money due to rising fuel costs are looking for ways to increase these fairly lucrative routes,” said Gary Dorman, an airline expert and senior vice president with NERA Economic Consulting. Therefore, he said, they are asking the Department of Transportation to negotiate with Asian countries to open traditionally restricted rights to sky routes in the East. Asian businesses are doing the same from their side with their own government transportation authorities.

In the meantime airlines are investing in added routes to and from Asia.

“If they can establish brand dominance now, they will be one step ahead of their competition as conditions improve,” Mr. Dorman said.

As a result, airlines are aggressively vying to lay claim to the fastest, first, only, most direct and highest-quality service flights to major Asian cities. Here are some of the claims:

¶Finnair claims that the shortest flight distance from New York to New Delhi is via its hub city of Helsinki — 11,853 kilometers, or 7,365 miles.

¶Cathay Pacific claims the most connections to Chinese cities through its Hong Kong hub. This year Cathay has added 28 new flights a week to India.

¶Singapore Airlines started the first all-business-class flights from North America to Asia in May, from Newark International Airport in New York to Singapore.

¶[Northwest Airlines](#) (which dropped the “Orient” from its official title in 1986) has operated the longest uninterrupted service between North America and Asia of any airline. It is the leading American carrier serving Japan with the most flights, capacity and passengers. It was also the first to introduce hot oshibori towels in flight, in 1940.

Airlines also compete to provide the most Asian ambience, authenticity and comfort for Asian-born travelers and those who appreciate Asian cuisine.

For flights to India, Lufthansa commissioned Hemant Oberoi, executive chef for Taj Hotels, to develop traditional curried meals and select teas.

EVA Air offers selections from the Taiwanese restaurant chain Din Tai Fung — items like braised lamb chop with shiso prune sauce or sautéed tiger prawns in a green tea sauce.

Such amenities and increased routes are a vast improvement for those who have long been flying between the East and the West.

[Brian Williams](#), the managing director of Swire Hotels, has been commuting for 20 years from offices in London and Hong Kong to Beijing, where his company has several properties.

“I am quite happy as a clam flying business class on Cathay Pacific, slurping roast duck noodle soup, sipping a French claret then getting a good solid sleep,” Mr. Williams said. “It’s all so civilized now.”