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tried and tested

Finnair: New York – Helsinki Vantaa Business Class



FIRST IMPRESSIONS

My Finnair business-class experience began handsomely enough at the dedicated check-in at JFK's Terminal 8, where the agent, gracious and welcoming, priority tagged my suitcase. After proceeding expeditiously through the reserved security line, I made for the Admirals Club lounge, open to Finnair business-class passengers. Two complimentary drinks and an e-mail check later, and all, so far, was top flight.

BOARDING

How precious a commodity is ease in airline travel these days, and that is precisely what Finnair delivered. After boarding via the dedicated business-class line, I was warmly greeted by the purser and escorted to my window seat in the spacious, cool blue-gray cabin. A stewardess took my jacket for hanging, bagged my shoes for overhead storage, offered a selection of newspapers, and delivered a flute of ice-cold Joseph Perrier Champagne. This was exemplary business-level service, smooth, friendly and unfussy.

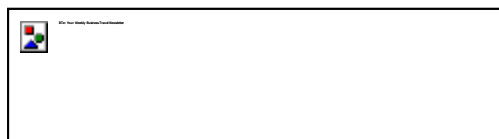
SEAT COMFORT

Finnair's A330 business-class cabin's 2-2-2 configuration includes 30 forward section seats and another 12 behind an intervening service galley. Each square-shaped module has full-stretch legroom, with a 20-inch seat width and pitch of 62 inches, a touch-screen AVOD entertainment system featuring an engaging 3D moving map and a decent selection of movie, TV, music and game channels.

Aside from the magazine slot next to the monitor, however, no space existed for loose items or personal effects. The 11-degree angle Recaro lie-flat seat felt somewhat exoskeletal in its mechanics, with macro- and micro-positioning via two keypads in the armrest; however, Finnair is in the process of introducing fully-flat business-class seats on long-haul flights.

THE FLIGHT

With Helsinki eight hours away, my priorities were to eat, drink and sleep. An excellent dinner menu and top-shelf liquor selection satisfied the first two, highlighted by bacon-wrapped beef and 20-year-old Calvados. Sleep was a fitful affair, owing to the seat's slight pitch and unyielding footrest. The cabin lights stayed on a bit too long, and came on a bit too early, redeemed by the refreshing breakfast, which included properly hot coffee and succulently cold fruit.



ARRIVAL

Clearing customs and retrieving my baggage were a snap, emblematic of the refreshing efficiency of Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, which officially launched its Terminal 2 extension on Dec. 11. Representing a €143 million investment, the three-story long-haul terminal is the centerpiece of a strategic focus on promoting the airport as the shortest possible route from Europe to Asia, as well as from Finnair's sole North American gateway, New York, to Indian destinations such as Delhi.

Exemplifying the airport's rebranded "Smooth Traveling" slogan, the extension boasts two irresistible new draws, the Via Lounge and Via Spa. Seating 250 people, the softly lit lounge, open from 6 a.m. to midnight, is a polished retreat done in white opalescence and futuristic design elements. Services include six private showers, three iMacs, free Wi-Fi, complimentary light fare and beer and wine. Available for passengers bound for non-Schengen destinations, the lounge welcomes business-class passengers and top-tier oneworld and Finnair Plus members for free. Other passenger classes may access the lounge for €45.

Developed by German spa pioneer Paul Haslauer, the adjacent Via Spa establishes a new standard in airport spas. Featuring next-generation, naturopathic spa and wellness treatments uniquely designed for the leg-cramped, jet-lagged air traveler, services include a runway-facing sauna, steam sauna, cold water paddling pool and heated ceramic chaise lounges. The spa is free only for Finnair Plus Platinum cardholders, with a charge of €45 for all other passengers; combined access to lounge and spa is available for €70.

VERDICT

As Finnair celebrated 40 years of service between New York's JFK and Helsinki in 2009, I am happy to celebrate my first experience with the carrier, which finds its best expression in the casually efficient, genuinely cheerful attitude of its customer facing staff. Seat mechanics aside, my round trip to Helsinki ranked among my most comfortable and memorable long-haul experiences.

— *Jeff Heilman*