

Nickeled and dimed in the air, but

THERE's much passenger discontent in the skies, with some major carriers —particularly in America — running into severe turbulence in a scathing new US airline survey.

While a few international carriers — Singapore Airlines, Emirates and Cathay Pacific — stood out as doing a commendable job despite the turmoil in the industry, ratings generally were down across the board.

Overall, the survey reported that flying has reached “new lows” as financially ailing airlines resort to “nickel and diming” passengers to make ends meet.

Within the US domestic ranks, the biggest declines were posted by the biggest names — American, Delta, United and US Airways — which all saw their overall ratings drop by about

five to six points on the Zagat survey's 30-point scale on the ratings they received in a similar airline study four years ago.

And though performance on international flights generally outscored domestic travel — logically enough, given that longer trips typically call for bigger, more comfortable aircraft and at least some semblance of meals and service. But even here most carriers saw substantial ratings dips.

Not surprisingly, said the survey findings, food was the category in which airlines earned their lowest ratings — domestically averaging just nine points out of 30.

“Embarrassingly, airlines generally scored better for their web sites than for any aspect of their performance in the air,” said the survey. “As one surveyor put it: ‘it's too bad you can't fly the web site’. Fifty-five per cent of surveyors typically book

Here's what Zagat travellers said about your favourite airline

Aeroflot Russian Airlines

It is not the airline of the Soviet days — thank heavens — but while this state controlled carrier keeps getting better (“the smiling lessons are showing”), it's still hit-and-miss with some flights reminiscent of a WWII bombing mission. One of the few airlines to have improved its ratings, it still trails the pack.

Air China

Not the best but is improving thanks to newer, more comfortable planes, with enviable seat pitching and polite service. Yet it's not without its faults. Delays, limited entertainment and a strange mix of Chinese and Western food, plus an enigmatic English-language web site.

Air France

“Vive La France!” say Franco fans flying high on the free flowing, real champagne and better-than-average food served aboard this classy Sky Team member that recently merged with KLM. Updated premium classes are ‘magnifique’ and individual TV screens help distraction from cramped coach quarters, but the web site can be moody, ditto the Lacroix-clad crews, and nostalgists sigh, it's “not as luxe as it once was”.

Air India

Economical fares and unusually good Indian food — especially if you're a vegetarian — are the strong points of this carrier linking the subcontinent with the US and other destinations. While defenders say the experience is better than you might expect, caustic critics contend that inconsistent service, long delays and old aircraft mean you fly it only out of necessity.

Air New Zealand

If you must fly 15 hours in coach, it doesn't get better than this cut-above New Zealander that's made a monumental comeback in the past few years. It boasts a calm, capable staff, a comfortable economy class and memorable meals. It's currently rolling out reconfigured premium cabins with state-of-the-art, lie-flat seats that make a long haul a lot more likeable.

American Airlines

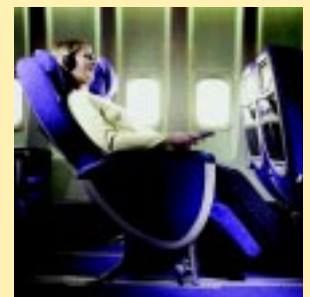
This US mega carrier and oneworld member is rated better for flying international than domestic, with “awesome” First class, “flagship suites” on some planes and a user-friendly web site. Downsides include disappearing legroom and no free booze in coach, “blah” food, so-so biz seats and service that “flip-flops” from “efficient and courteous” to Rhett Butler-like - they simply “don't give a damn”.

British Airways

The Brits know how to do it right, declare fans of this very civilised oneworld member. Sure, coach can be cramped but even it has some style — personal TVs, edible food — and premier economy is a big plus. Add in accommodating service, an excellent web site and fantastic flat beds in Business and First and you've got a transatlantic standard bearer that beats the hell out of most US competitors.

Cathay Pacific

There's no better option for long-haul trips to Hong Kong and beyond than this Rolls Royce of carriers, a oneworld member known for its gracious, pampering service and first-class that epitomizes ultimate luxury. Excellent entertainment options and incredible airport lounges are pluses, and if quibblers contend coach could use more legroom and the food isn't special, more advise that “save up your money or miles” to experience “flying as it should be”.



hey, the web sites are really good

their flights via airline web sites — and another 14 per cent book through Expedia, Travelocity etc.”

Other survey findings:

- Among the ‘Big Six’ US carriers — American, Continental, Delta, Northwest, United and US Airways — Continental ranked first overall for domestic, as well as international flights.

- The principal irritants for surveyors are delays, cancellations and waiting (cited by 42 per cent of respondents), followed by cramped seating and crowding (21 per cent) and poor service (13 per cent). Ironically, food was criticised by only two per cent of surveyors, perhaps signalling that passengers largely agree with one of the people surveyed who declared “airline food is an oxymoron”.

- New York City’s JFK airport scored a dubious double whammy — it was voted the worst domestic airport (followed by Chicago’s O’Hare, as well as the worst international airport, with London’s Heathrow at number two.

Of the 55 international airlines surveyed — excluding US carriers — Singapore Airlines came out well on top, winning four of the four five survey categories - ‘Top Overall’, ‘Top Comfort’, ‘Top Service’ and ‘Top Food’ — in both premium and economy classes. In the fifth category — ‘Top Web Site’ — it finished in joint third place.

Qantas featured in two of the five categories — Top Comfort, in which it finished joint third in the premium class section and Top Web Site, again finishing in joint third spot.



China Southern Airlines

China’s largest carrier “gets you there” just fine in a fleet of modern planes but when it comes to anything beyond basic transport, it has a long way to go. Crews try hard but services and amenities are mediocre and some cite uncomfortable seating akin to “a bus in a rush hour”. Savvy travellers upgrade to business because it “hardly costs more than economy”.

Emirates

This up-and-comer inspires coach clients to wonder “am I in Business?” thanks to excellent service, wow-inducing personal entertainment systems and repasts that taste a lot better than typical airline food. Nitpickers claim premium class can vary depending on seat quality but, at its best, it’s like a “seven-star hotel in the sky” and makes you feel “an honoured client” or even an “emir”.



Japan Airlines

High class entertainment systems and “ridiculously good” services that overrides the main gripe: seating that can be tight if you’re over 5ft 1in; meals are diverse “and not half bad” and first-class approaches world-class, so despite a gripe or two about expensive fares, most advise “take off your shoes, relax and enjoy the flight”.

KLM

Now merged with Air France, this carrier is perhaps not what it used to be but fans insist it does a very good job on flights to and within Europe, with special kudos for their “fair deals” and cool entertainment systems and the “little Dutch houses full of gin” handed out in Business class. However service and food get mixed marks and some find quarters cramped — maybe no surprise from the land that thinks “wooden shoes are comfortable”.

Korean Air

This Seoul-based carrier gets good marks for its “kind flight attendants” who provide especially attentive service in premium classes, great deals for Pan-Asian fares and more than decent Korean eats are further benefits. But some planes could use “a major makeover” and a few report that it can be “hard to redeem mileage” from SkyTeam members or “pick seats online”.

Lufthansa

The stereotype about German efficiency holds true for this run-by-the-rules Star Alliance member whose crews are professional if not always warm enough — “smile, please”. Economy cabins vary from comfortable to “knees-in-the-throat” tight and some feel the food needs help, ditto the entertainment systems, but hit a flight with wireless Internet access and those amazing new Business seats and you may find it “wunderbar”.



Malaysia Airlines

“What flying used to be like,” sigh fans who call this punctual Malaysian airline “a pleasure” — particularly for long hauls, thanks to friendly attendants and comfy, young planes (“pick any movie or video game to play on your personal screen”). Also highlighted: hub Kuala Lumpur’s superb airport and state-of-the-art First Class cabins with excellent food, so even if the web site can frustrate, most surveyors find it “swell” overall.

Beijing Airport does it in style ...

If you have, like I did, spent two or three days hacking around an exhibition hall at 28 Centigrade, and then at the airport you find that your plane is delayed and you have to kill two hours, finding a massage parlour in the terminal is just near to heaven.

But to make it perfectly clear — it is a strictly proper service — and you can also enjoy a foot washing and massage service with all the mod cons. Located on the second floor and near to the restaurants is Beijing International Entertainment Centre Ltd. Staffed, probably by past entrants to the Miss Airport competition, and clad in long silky dresses, they are there to massage those tired, weary and sweaty feet.

I settled for the half hour foot service at 66Y (US\$8.00) and you are led to a comfortable lie back chair, which your body weight activates into motion, and lo and behold — electrically warmed rollers are moving up and down your back. The young lady picked up my socks with a pair of tweezers, as though they might carry some form of plague, and then washed my ankles and feet. Every toe is cleaned, not just once, but several times — believe me it is bliss. And surprise, surprise, whilst you were receiving the foot treatment, they sneak away your shoes — and return them fully cleaned and polished!

Feeling very much better, and when walking out glanced in the mirror, to see that I needed a haircut, and situated next door is the De Luxe hairdressers. Here for another \$8 you can have a 'Wash cut and dry' service. And when those beautiful young ladies wash your hair, they really wash your hair - four times. The washing stage is done by lying fully flat on your back on a bed (again the vibrating rollers up and down your spine) with your neck and head over a hand-basin — and Miss Beijing Airport really gets to work with enthusiasm and gusto, and with much snapping of her fingers against your temples. Just why they do this finger snapping routine is rather an oriental mystery but it is de rigueur when you have a haircut in China.

It's a great way to kill time in Beijing International.

Brian Thomson, in Chengdu , central China



Qantas

Making long hauls to Oz bearable, Qantas offers the "laid-back charm" of cheerful crews

and the lie-down charm of "heavenly sleeper seats in updated premium cabins, plus seat-back video screens even in coach, "unusual" menus and great Aussie wines. An easy to navigate web site is a bonus but there are a few reports of "tired old planes" and little legroom in economy.

Singapore Airlines

Rated overall no 1 in the Zagat survey, this "Secretariat of airlines" will "spoil you for any other" thanks to 100 on-demand movies, perfectly attentive, eye-candy flight attendants and "phenomenal meals" — and that's just in coach. This Star Alliance partner's premium cabins are so

"heavenly" — think advance ordered gourmet cuisine and fresh orchids in the loos —



that many "feel sad when it's time to deplane".

South African Airways

Surprisingly friendly and efficient flight attendants along with delicious wines help make long flights "not bad" at all, although some blast "smaller-than-

usual" seats and a web site that "seems to be down a lot". Business class travellers report a "true, luxury experience".

Thai Airways International

"Thai-riffic" flight attendants "bring graciousness to new heights" on this civilized Thai member of Star Alliance, where coach passengers "feel almost human" thanks to bigger-than-normal seats and delicious Siamese eats; equipment gets mixed reviews, however, with some citing an "ageing" fleet with no individual entertainment screens and a website that can be problematic for some bookings.



Virgin Atlantic

"Yeah, baby!" on Sir Richard Branson's exuberant carrier, "cheeky" crews host a party in the sky featuring cool goody bags and personal video screens with a robust movie selection, even in coach. The red carpet treatment in upper class supplies the "best sleep around" thanks to lay-flat seats", massages and pyjamas. Spoilers say the web site's "buggy" and declare that all the hype doesn't compensate for the "pack-'em-in-like-sardines" philosophy in economy.



How the leading airlines scored: Ratings out of 30; 26-30 extraordinary to perfection; 20-25 very good to excellent; 16-19 good to very good; 10-15 fair to good.

	Comfort	Service	Food	Website
Singapore Airlines:	22	26	23	19
Cathay Pacific:	18	23	20	18
Emirates:	19	23	20	19
Virgin Atlantic:	17	20	17	2
British Airways:	16	18	14	18
Air New Zealand:	18	20	16	16

Top Overall - Premium

- 1) Singapore Airlines
- 2) Cathay Pacific
- 3) Virgin Atlantic
- 4) Emirates

Top Overall Economy

- 1) Singapore Airlines
- 2) Emirates
- 3) Cathay Pacific