

DELTA AIMS TO BE BEST

by Jeff Kriendler



Delta's latest fleet addition: the Boeing 777-200LR.

Gone are the Bibles, long since removed from airplane magazine racks. In-flight announcements in soothing Southern drawl are now a rarity rather than the norm. On flights to Dubai [Dubayy], Cairo [al-Qāhira], Ammān, and İstanbul, the aircraft's position relative to Mecca is shown on the dynamic in-flight map. The top executives are as likely to root for New York Yankees or Mets than the airline's hometown Atlanta Braves. But one custom has not changed: Coca-Cola products are still the preferred beverage, a salute to a corporate neighbor in Atlanta.

This is the new Delta Air Lines (IATA: DL/ICAO: DAL) which, fueled by improving global economic conditions, is expected to yield \$1.2 billion in annual savings this year as it completes its merger with Northwest Airlines (*Airways*, March 2009). The union of these two major carriers has vaulted Delta to the number one ranking in the world airline hierarchy as measured by size and scope. With other airline 'consolidation' possibilities in the works, not least the recently announced plan to combine United and Continental Airlines (which would, if approved, out-size Delta), the Georgian juggernaut is now using its solid financial foundation and powerful network to meet new competitive challenges while striving to foster cordial relations with its workforce of 70,000.

Mix of cultures

Today's Delta is a far cry from its humble beginnings in Macon, Georgia, in 1924 as Huff Daland Dusters, the world's first commercial agricultural flying company.

The company's vital statistics are staggering: more than 160 million passengers a year, who will generate revenue in excess of \$30 billion. Offering service to 355 destinations in 65 countries on six continents, Delta currently operates a mainline fleet of more than 730 plus

a regional fleet (including that of partners) of another 700 airplanes. It was a founding member of the SkyTeam global alliance, and along with partners Air France-KLM has created the industry's leading trans-Atlantic joint venture. There are hubs in Amsterdam, Atlanta, Cincinnati, Detroit, Memphis, Minneapolis-St Paul, New York—both JFK and LaGuardia—Salt Lake City, Paris, and Tokyo. As a consequence of this extensive global reach, Delta has the world's largest airline loyalty program comprising 74 million members.

Delta began its international expansion in 1953 through a merger with Chicago & Southern Airlines, which introduced it to Cuba, Jamaica, Venezuela, and other points throughout the Caribbean, Canada, and Bermuda; a larger presence in New York and Boston came with a merger with Northeast Airlines in 1972 (*Airways*, November & December 2008). Post-deregulation, Delta continued its growth by absorbing Western Airlines, and launched trans-Pacific service from Atlanta to Tokyo via Portland, Oregon.

With a taste for overseas flying, Delta boldly entered the trans-Atlantic market by purchasing practically all of Pan Am's operations to Europe. Delta was to feed and invest in that struggling carrier as it sought to reposition under bankruptcy protection as a Miami-based entity serving the Caribbean and Latin America. On December 4, 1991, when Delta failed to provide the committed working capital, Pan Am folded completely.

The international reach of Delta became truly global on October 29, 2008, when it merged with Northwest Airlines. By 2009, the airline launched nonstop Los Angeles–Sydney flights, becoming the only US airline since Pan Am to serve six continents.

Commenting on the merger with Northwest, Mike Campbell, Delta's executive vice president human resources and labor relations, says: "Delta has been very successful in assimilating airlines and their cultures. Not all airline mergers are created equally and we have attempted to remove those issues which historically have delayed—or prevented—implementation."

In mapping out the ideal merger path, Campbell explains that there was a collective vision among Delta's leadership that they had to take a positive, proactive position in advance of the merger by seeking an accelerated agreement with pilots concerning seniority and, with enlightened ALPA (Air Line Pilots Association) leadership, was able to successfully conclude negotiations.



A uniform approach: (back row, from right to left) Delta 1979-1983, Delta winter 1968-1970, Northwest, Delta 1970-1973, Western Airlines (WAL merged with Delta in 1986), Delta 1983-2001 with 1996 Olympic Games scarf; (front row, from left to right) Northeast (NEA merged with Delta in 1972), Delta 1973-1975, Delta summer 1968-1969, Delta 1973-1975, Northwest, Pan Am (Delta acquired Pan Am's trans-Atlantic routes in 1991).

ALPA's Delta Master Executive Council (MEC), under the leadership of Captain Lee Moak, understands the changing nature of the airline business and its dismal performance over the last two decades. Fresh in mind was Delta's excursion through Chapter 11 bankruptcy and its vulnerability as a takeover target, and indeed concerns over whether it could survive on its own. Over the last 20 years, 186 US airlines have entered bankruptcy while only 23 emerged, with a scant 13 of those still flying today.

In an interview with Moak, a JFK-based Boeing 767 captain, the ALPA MEC chairman relates that his members had lent a powerful voice in opposition to the attempt of US Airways to acquire Delta in a hostile takeover in 2006. "We strongly felt it was not in the best interest of Delta, its employees, or the traveling public, but recognized that we would have to adapt to remain viable and standing alone was the best course of action." Moak added that after Delta exited bankruptcy protection, the environment was right for consolidation, and he believed that a merger with Northwest was the most rational approach, creating an end-to-end carrier with no significant overlap. "Our goal was to create a healthy aggressive airline that would survive and then thrive, and we believe we are well on course to reaching that objective with the additional people and assets of Northwest," he asserts. The former US Marine Corps pilot notes that his objective is to engage his membership and work closely with all the airline's stakeholders, including management, other employee groups, Wall Street, political leaders, regulators, and customers.

Moak adds that the Delta MEC is working very closely with Delta's senior executive team to ensure that the company succeeds, and he believes that maintaining a positive, open dialog is in the best interest of all the employees. "We are one airline, one pilot group—12,000 strong—and we achieved seniority integration and a new collective bargaining agreement in record time, even before the merger officially closed. We negotiated roughly 50 million shares of Delta stock, and as a group, remain a major Delta shareholder."

By contrast, pilots at the combined US Airways and America West Airlines have yet to achieve seniority and a collective bargaining agreement five years after their merger.

Commenting on the transition from Northwest to Delta, NWA pilot and *Airways* contributing editor Captain Rand Peck says, "Lee Moak did not put Northwest pilots in the back seat." Indeed, former NWA pilots are represented on the MEC and LECs (Local Executive Councils) and on every committee. "We were warmly welcomed," Peck adds.

Family values

Mike Campbell, who joined Delta from Ford & Harrison, the leading labor relations law firm in Atlanta, and worked in a similar capacity at Continental, remarks that it was imperative to demonstrate to the employees how they would benefit from a combination of two powerful airlines. Delta achieved this by granting equity in the new company to all workers, and it has committed to restore the pay of frontline employees to industry standard by the end of October 2010. Emphasizing that a strong carrier would assure job security, he appealed to employee pride by saying that a successful merger would once again create a true flag carrier in the mold of Pan Am.

From its earliest days under the leadership of C E Woolman and Tom Beebe, Delta always had a nurturing environment, and used the term 'family' instead of 'company'. Delta had the industry's best management labor relations, which continued until it hit difficult times in the Nineties. Historically, its senior management was home-grown, but in the turbulent period of the last decade of the previous century it hired Leo Mullin, a utility executive with no airline background, who failed to inspire the workforce.

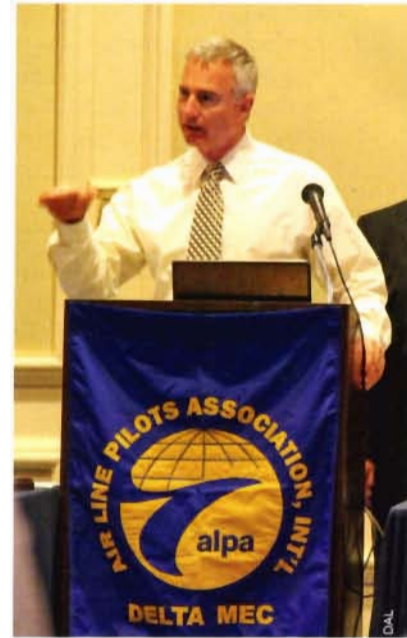
Since 2007, Delta has been under the leadership of Richard Anderson, a lawyer by training with early experience in the airline industry at Continental. Anderson left the comfort of the lawyers' suites to run technical operations, and developed a passion for the business, with particular interest in the objective of serving the customer.

The senior executive team has put together a booklet that has been distributed to all employees. As Delta's motivational doctrine, *Rules Of The Road* spells out goals

and business practices to achieve success where performance excellence is rewarded, and gently warns that non-performance will result in dismissal from the ranks. The underlying message is the airline's commitment to create trust with the employees and foster a dedication to customer satisfaction.

Campbell notes that Delta runs a meritocracy, and that even if its expanse and sheer size makes it challenging to be a family, it still can be a team with management leading by example. Capt Peck admits that Northwest employees had lost trust in their senior management over the years and have been impressed with Anderson's leadership skills.

The task for Delta of bringing Northwest into the fold was daunting, given NWA's history of fractious labor-management relations. When asked to describe the testy relations which existed at Northwest, Campbell



Lee Moak helped create the world's largest airline when he made a labor deal directly with management.



A fond farewell to CEO Jerry Grinstein was posted on the nose of a Delta Boeing 757-200 in 2007.

diplomatically replies, "It was a tough culture." That was juxtaposed against Delta's historic easy-going Southern style that was genteel and cordial. The philosophy of C E Woolman, Delta's founding chairman, which rings true today, was: "Take care of your employees and in turn they will take care of their customers."

Less taxing was the acquisition of trans-Atlantic routes, as Pan Am was in a downward spiral. "Pan Am pilots retained much of their blue-bloodedness going over to Delta, perceiving Delta as a boll weevil, deep-South outfit that somehow got thrust onto the international stage," said Robert Gandt, a former Pan Am captain who transitioned to Delta. "In 1991 Delta still had a folksy, hometown culture, never having had a fratricidal labor war, and the employees were still deeply loyal to their benevolent management. The employees bought a 767 for the airline with their own dough—and to the ex-Pan Am-ers this seemed like something from a fairy tale. And as it turned out, as soon as Delta's fortunes began to wane, management began squeezing the payroll. Delta's employees became just as restive as any other US airline," Gandt pointed out.

The author of 13 books, including the best seller *Skydogs: The Fall of Pan Am* (Reviews, Jul/Aug 1995), Gandt said that Delta pilots had an intensely loyal attitude toward the company, thinking of themselves as part of management. "To our astonishment many of them were voluntarily giving back 5% of their paycheck to help the company during its expensive growth into the international market. Within a few years, those feelings changed dramatically. Delta's chairman at the time was Ron Allen, a hard-nosed ex-marketing executive who had little interest in employee morale. The pilots were coerced into a give-back contract in 1996 just before Delta announced a record earning year. Thereafter, the atmosphere became acrimonious, management and labor distrusting each other, and no one again talked of helping

the company through hard times."

In 2003, long-time Delta board member and former Western Airlines CEO Jerry Grinstein was named CEO of Delta to change that attitude. His efforts between 2004 and 2007 led to a resurgence of what insiders at Delta call the 'Delta spirit', culminating with the company's successful fight against a hostile takeover attempt by US Airways and emergence from bankruptcy protection three months later.

Upon his retirement in 2007, the editorial board of Delta's hometown newspaper, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, wrote that 'Grinstein realized early on—if he didn't already know—that Delta's survival depended as much on rebuilding employee morale as overhauling the company's finances'.

Product upgrades

The merged Delta/Northwest has an average fleet age of 15.6 years (a figure that will soon be lowered with the retirement of 40-year-old Douglas DC-9s), and the company has chosen to invest a billion dollars over the next three years to improve the quality and consistency of the in-flight experience and bring efficiencies to the fleet. These will yield substantial cost savings in years to come. Initially, the main beneficiaries of the customer service improvements will be first and 'BusinessElite' customers, but enhancements are also being made to the coach (economy) cabin.

Answering the competition, Delta is installing flat-bed seats in the BusinessElite section of 90 transoceanic aircraft: 14 Boeing 767-400ERs, 52 767-300ERs, 16 747-400s, and eight 777-200ERs. In-seat audio and video on demand (AVOD) will be placed throughout coach on 16 747-400s and 52 767-300ERs. Delta is also fitting 66 Bombardier CRJ700s operated by ASA, Comair, and SkyWest with a first



Aviation Partners Boeing blended winglets are being fitted to 737-800s (pictured), 757s, and 767s.

class section, increasing the number of Delta Connection aircraft with that configuration to 219. The budget covers the modification of 269 former NWA aircraft with Delta's blue leather-covered seats, more modern lighting, and cabin service features including increased overhead bin space.

To extend range and improve fuel efficiency, Delta is installing winglets on 170 767-300ERs, 757-200s, and 737-800s. Acceleration of the installation of Wi-Fi service has also been budgeted to bring the number of cyber-enabled aircraft to more than 530 by mid-2010.

This extensive list is in response to demands from premium passengers who have told the airline that they expect the comfort of a flat-bed seat with direct aisle access (gone are the days of middle seats), and consistency of product on regional jets as well as enhanced IFE (in-flight entertainment).

Centerpiece of Delta's service enhancements has been the decision to install flat-bed seating in BusinessElite sections on long-range services. In Delta's new 777 cabin configuration, all the seats are set at an angle to face the two aisles of the aircraft. Jennifer Coutts Clay, cabin interior specialist and author of *Jetliner Cabins* (Reviews, May 2004), the definitive reference guide, says: "The basic layout is 1-2-1. This means that there are four rows of angled individual seats running from the front to the back of the cabin. In the middle of the cabin there are two rows of 'center-line' seats positioned in a chevron format—sometimes described as 'V-shaped' or 'herringbone'. Along the sidewalls of the cabin, next to the windows, there are single 'outboard' seats.



Cabins are being upgraded with AVOD.

"The footrests of all the seats point towards the nearest aisle, while all the headrest areas are positioned away from the nearest aisle, maximizing privacy. With the new angled positioning of the individual seats, passengers and crew can move along the aisles of the cabin relatively easily—even when the seats are fully extended. With these developments management has responded to the top-priority requirements of the airline's high-yield passengers: direct aisle access, full stretch-out capability, enhanced privacy, and within-easy-reach PC power and USB ports."

Another key objective has been to accelerate the introduction of cyber-connectivity, and Delta now boasts the world's largest Wi-Fi-enabled fleet. According to a recent study undertaken by Forrester Research: 'In-flight internet access is as essential to the 21st century airline



Delta's home base is Atlanta, the world's largest airline hub.



ROB FINLAYSON

Delta, Air France, Aeromexico, and Korean Air formed the SkyTeam global alliance in 2000. Delta is the largest operator of the 757—this is a Dash 200.

experience as the beverage cart and is a source of much-needed ancillary revenue that is valued by today's tech focus travelers'. The study pointed out that nearly 70% of passengers are interested in being connected on flights of four hours or more.

Merger: approaching full integration

Following a perfectly planned course, Delta is on track to achieve its full 'run rate' (derived by taking the last quarter's results and projecting full-year benefits) merger synergies of more than \$2 billion annually by 2012. The merged airlines now fly under a single operating certificate, and reservation systems have been integrated, as well as revenue management and frequent flyer programs. On March 2, 2010, the first mixed cockpit crew took to the skies on a 757. Flight attendants have been trained on all fleet types, and from May 1 began flying on each other's pre-merger route systems. However, at the time of writing they had not integrated pending resolution of union representation. Delta is waiting for the AFA (Association of Flight Attendants)—which represented flight attendants at Northwest—to re-file for an election so the combined flight attendant group can choose whether or not they wish to be represented.

Airport customer service agents as well as those in reservations and cargo were represented at Northwest by the IAM (International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers), whereas Delta was non-union in these job functions. The IAM needs to file for an election so that those employees may choose whether or not to be represented by a union. Delta has not challenged their rights to hold these elections. Other labor groups such as aircraft maintenance technicians, simulator technicians,

and meteorologists from Northwest have chosen to become non-union, while the dispatchers from both carriers are all now represented by PAFCA (Professional Airline Flight Control Association).

Airline unions won a major victory on May 10 when the National Mediation Board ruled that a simple majority of workers who cast ballots to organize would recognize a union rather than a majority of the total labor group. The Air Transport Association filed a suit to challenge the new ruling.

Bob Mann of RW Mann Associates, a leading aviation consulting group, comments: "With help from upticks in the US and global economies, and resurgence in premium fare travel, Delta is now beginning to see the hard won fruits of efforts undertaken during one of the most challenging chapters in airline history, and its merger model with Northwest has become a template for all those considering further airline consolidation."

Mann also points out that shrewd capacity planning and scheduling adjustments, coupled with Delta's ability to mix-and-match under-utilized aircraft from the two component carriers' fleet and operations, created greater network opportunities for both.

He adds that Delta has benefited from moderation of the rising price of jet fuel, while careful capacity control has enhanced the ability to increase yield. As the world's largest airline, with a global network that is the envy of the industry, Delta's costs are lower, its revenue premiums greater, and its financial position substantially better today than before the merger. "As the former Northwest CEO, Richard Anderson was uniquely qualified to bridge the gap between Delta and Northwest cultures, striking a fine balance between being Delta's leader yet knowing the Northwest culture extremely well and being a partner to each and to both," Mann concludes.

Network alliance clout

"Unequivocally the best," states Glen Hauenstein, Delta's executive vice president-network planning and revenue management, in response to a question whether Delta has the greatest single-carrier route network. Ironically, Hauenstein—one of the airline industry's top aircraft planning and scheduling experts—had just returned from Paris after being stuck there by the volcanic ash-induced air travel disruptions (*Airways*, July 2010). "Adding to our footprint the power of SkyTeam partners, we also have the strongest alliance," he adds. While competitors will surely challenge his statements, Delta's route structure is indeed awesome and continues to grow.

In 2005, the airline flew only 20% of its ASMs (available seat miles) on international services. This year, the percentage will be above 40% and climbing toward Delta's long-term objective of 50%. Hauenstein says that the airline's major hubs are performing extremely well. "Detroit has been especially pleasing as the economy—particularly the auto industry—is recovering from a ruinous 2009."

As a scheduling and revenue maximization junkie, Hauenstein finds he is in 'nirvana' with all of the fleet options and the ability to move types into different markets. Delta has 'surgically' transplanted NWA Airbus A320s to the Salt Lake City hub, amplifying access to East Coast markets because of the operational performance of the Airbus airplanes. McDonnell Douglas MD-90s have been transferred to Minneapolis, where missions do not require longer-range aircraft. The airline is also maximizing opportunities brought about through its joint venture with Air France-KLM while increasing its own reach with the addition this summer of flights such as JFK to Stockholm and Copenhagen [København], JFK to Abuja, Nigeria, and Seattle to Beijing.

In addition, Delta is benefiting from its close relationship with Alaska Airlines, which is feeding traffic

at Los Angeles and Seattle for European, Asian, and Australian connections.

Delta will continue to expand in Africa and has recently signed a code-share agreement with GOL Linhas Aereas Inteligentes (*Airways*, May 2003), which will allow it greater access to Brazil and South America. "We will have selective modest growth this year as global economies continue to improve," Hauenstein points out.

Another objective is to enhance its presence in New York. The recently approved (with some restrictions) slot exchange with US Airways has the potential to make Delta a much stronger carrier at LaGuardia, and Delta is working to upgrade its infrastructure at JFK. In particular, Delta's Terminal 3 at JFK has become outdated because of



Delta Connection carriers operate more than 2,500 flights a day, adding to the 1,500 daily flights of Delta itself.



Line-up at Detroit: less than 40 aircraft remain in NWA colors.



All former Northwest 747-400s have been repainted into Delta colors.

Fast Facts—Delta Air Lines

IATA: DL **ICAO:** DAL **IATA/ARC:** 006 **Radio:** Delta

1030 Delta Boulevard
Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport
Atlanta, GA 30354
USA

Website: www.delta.com

Cities served 355

Delta Connection Carriers: Atlantic Southeast Airlines-ASA (CRJ200/700/900), Chautauqua (ERJ 145), Comair (CRJ200/700/900), Compass (ERJ 175), Freedom (ERJ 145), Mesaba (SAAB 340, CRJ200/900), Pinnacle (CRJ900), Shuttle America (ERJ 175, for Delta Shuttle), SkyWest (EMB-120, CRJ200/700/900)

Code-share partners: Alaska Airlines/Horizon Air, American Eagle, China Airlines, Royal Air Maroc

Other code-shares: Aeroflot, Aeromexico, AirEuropa, Air France-KLM, Alitalia, Avianca, China Southern, CSA Czech Airlines, GDL, Kenya Airways, Korean Air, V Australia, Virgin Blue

FFP: SkyMiles

Interests: Comair, Compass Airlines, DAL Aircraft Trading, DAL Global Services, DAL Moscow (50/50 partnership with Aeroflot), Delta AirElite Business Jets, Epsilon Trading, Kappa Capital Management, Mesaba Airlines, Regional Elite Airline Services

Founded: May 30, 1924 (as Huff Daland Dusters)

Start date: June 17, 1929

Ownership: Publicly traded company (NYSE: DAL)

Employees: 70,000

CEO: Richard H Anderson

Fleet (average age 15.6 years)

Type	Nº	Seats	Engines
Airbus A319-114 (charter)	7	F28C26	CFMI CFM56-5A5
Douglas DC-9-31/-32	16*	F16Y84	PW JT8D-7B/-9A
Douglas DC-9-41	7*	F16Y94	PW JT8D-11
Airbus A319-114	50	F16Y108	CFMI CFM56-5A5
Boeing 737-700	10	F12Y112	CFMI CFM56-7B-26/3
Douglas DC-9-51	34	F16Y109	PW JT8D-17
McDonnell Douglas MD-88	117	F14Y128 (to be F14Y136)	PW JT8D-219
Airbus A320-211	27	F16Y132	CFMI CFM56-5A1
Airbus A320-212	42	F16Y132	CFMI CFM56-5A3
McDD MD-90-30	23	F12Y138 (to be F16Y144)	IAE V2528-D5
Boeing 737-800	71	F16Y144	CFMI CFM56-7B-26
Boeing 757-200 (75X)	54 48	F24Y159 F26Y158	PW PW2037
(5500, 75N)	21**	F22Y160	
(5600, 75N)	7	F22Y162	
(5600 Atlantic/ Pacific, 75A)	8	J16Y144	
	1	F24Y159	
(Hawaii, 75V)	4	F22Y156	
(5600, 75J Interport)	7	J20Y162	
(ER, 75E)	17	J16Y158	
Boeing 757-300	16	F24Y200	PW PW2040
Boeing 767-300ER (76L)	27	J36Y185	PW PW4060
Boeing 767-300ER (76L)	14	J36Y185	GE CF6-80C2B6F
(76G)	7	J34Y181	GE CF6-80C2B6F
(76T)	7	J30Y189	GE CF6-80C2B6F
Boeing 767-300 (76Q)	10	F24Y238	GE CF6-80A2
(ETOPS, domestic)	4	F24Y238	PW PW4060
Boeing 767-400ER (76D)	7	J40Y206	GE CF6-80C2B8F
(76C)	14	J42Y204	
Airbus A330-223	11	J32Y211	PW PW4168A
Boeing 777-200 (ER)	8	J50Y221 (to be J45Y223)	RR Trent 892B-17
Boeing 777-200LR	10	J45Y233	GE GE90-110B1
Airbus A330-323E	21	J34Y264	PW PW4168A
Boeing 747-400	16	J65Y338	PW PW4056

* all to be retired by mid-2010

** one inactive

On order

McDonnell Douglas MD-90-30	5	(ex-China Eastern)
Boeing 737-800	2	due Jul10, Aug10
Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner	18	(ex-NWA, subject to conversion to other type)



Current pilot and flight attendant uniforms.

its age (despite several short-term modifications costing \$70 million). Craig Jenks, president of New York-based Airline/Aircraft Projects, an airline consulting firm, observes: "The Delta terminal dates to a period when airport architects aimed to be clever with the use of space, which made it very hard for passengers to have any visual clues where or how they are located and moving spatially, similar to Paris-Charles de Gaulle's Terminal 1. Delta's main rivals at JFK, namely American and JetBlue, both have new terminals that give customers a distinctly better experience. Delta has requirement for more gates than exist at present and greater ease of connection for transiting passengers. What is at stake here is how soon the largest US airline will have a proper terminal at the largest international gateway in the country."

Delta's treasurer, Paul Jacobson, agrees. "Customers equate Terminal 3 to a third world-country, and I think they are right." Now Delta is in discussions with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to determine a 'long-term solution'. PAANJ's Aviation Director Susan Baer concurs that the airline's customers "deserve better."

In the first quarter of 2010, Delta reduced its loss to \$256 million in the face of increased costs and the financial impact of winter storms. The airline forecasts a profitable second quarter despite traffic disruptions caused by the Icelandic volcano eruption. Key to whether it will be able to meet forecasts is the cost of turbojet kerosene, with Delta warning that 'rapidly escalating fuel prices have the potential to be a major financial headwind'. Those who follow the shifting winds of international commercial aviation know that rarely do currents remain stable. Most analysts agree, however, that Delta has a head-start on the competition and is not obsessed with the need to be the largest global airline—just the best.

As noted aviation historian Ron Davies wrote in his 1990 history of the airline, 'Delta may not have been born with a silver spoon in its mouth but, in making its own way, it has become its own silversmith'. Whether it be gold or silver, Delta will be among the industry's medal winners for years to come. →



Delta's Force for Global Good comprises Delta employees, customers, and community partners in an effort to promote positive change for improving the standards of living and the environment where Delta employees and customers live and work. This 767-300ER (fleet n° 1701/N171DZ) highlights the partnership with Habitat for Humanity.

In-flight with Delta Air Lines

Flight: DL8

Route: Atlanta, Georgia (IATA: ATL/ICAO: KATL)–Dubai [Dubayy], United Arab Emirates (DXB/OMDB)

Aircraft: Boeing 777-200LR

Delta invited *Airways* to sample its new international long-haul business class product over the ATL–DXB route, one of the carrier's longest stage lengths.

Departure was from Gate E-13 in Delta's international wing at Atlanta-Jackson Hartsfield Airport, the world's busiest—*Airways*, June 2009 & November 2005—and main hub for the Atlanta-based carrier. (Work is progressing on a new wing which will expand the airport's international concourse upon completion in 2012.)

The gate area was spacious and well lit with ample seating. Exactly one hour before the 2145 STD, gate announcements were delivered in a pleasing manner. After the gate agent made a few procedural announcements, the lead flight attendant welcomed passengers over the PA (public address), encouraging them to ask for anything they wanted, including updated sports scores. Boarding began 45 minutes before the scheduled departure time, and the aircraft pushed back five minutes early, after pre-departure drinks were offered in business class.

A cabin attendant announced that the flight that evening was the inaugural of a brand new 777-200LR—its first revenue service after delivery from Seattle. The cabin crew complement of 11, including three fluent in Arabic, was, as expected, quite 'mature', with several of the team having seniority in excess of 40 years. This roundtrip is worth some 30 flight hours, so it is very popular with the senior crowd who can bid three such trips per month and complete their monthly flying requirement. There were two complete crews on the flightdeck—two captains and two first officers—who rotated rest periods with duty, using the crew bunks located above the cockpit.

The new business seat is extremely comfortable and extends fully. However, some couples travelling together have complained that the configuration and shape of the seats are not conducive to easy communications. Also, there is little storage space, and a sparse area for shoes and other items that you would wish to have within easy reach on the floor. The in-flight magazine, *Sky*, was buried behind the seat, accessible only when the latter is in a reclined attitude.

Delta's commitment to upgrade service, food, and wine was evident, and the flight attendants

seemed to be very proud and pleased with the improvement in the product. Indeed, passengers were heard to compliment the new service techniques and offering. As of April 1, Delta fully aligned its service on aircraft previously operated by Northwest to match its own model, which dispensed with the use of carts for serving food in BusinessElite in an effort to enhance the personalization of service. In its place, the appetizer tray presentation on Flight 8 was most attractive, offering two cold choices and a soup along with a variety of breads. A selection of four entrées (main courses to non-US readers) was offered, including fish, beef, chicken, and pasta, all created by the airline's international chef Michelle Bernstein. To complement the meal, a selection of Californian, Argentinean, French, Chilean, and Australian wines and Champagne have been selected by Andrea Robinson, Delta's master sommelier. Dessert was an all-American favorite: vanilla ice cream sundae.

Although the use of famous wine and food experts in creating the menu probably has little value in driving a customer's decision to fly a particular airline, elite customers have become attuned to the 'marketing' of notable gourmet chefs, epicures, and wine connoisseurs. The real test is in the variety and quality of the food and wine—and how they are served—and Delta scored highly in this area.

An amenity kit was at the seat, along with an oversized blanket and large pillow. Only one newspaper selection—*USA Today*—was offered, and there were no magazines in the racks—a disappointment. Wi-Fi is still not available on transoceanic flights.

Throughout the night, the flight attendants patrolled the cabin and offered snacks (chips, cookies, and chocolate) for the few passengers who were not asleep. A selection of a pre-arrival light meal was provided approximately 90 minutes before landing—the pizza was hot and savory.

Arrival in Dubai was at 1935lt, five minutes ahead of schedule, and bags were delivered within 20 minutes.

Overall impression

Delta delivered on its promise of providing an enhanced experience in its BusinessElite cabin, most notably with the installation of flat-bed seats and the new in-seat AVOD (audio and video on demand) menu. It has closed the competitive advantage that other US and overseas carriers have had in providing flat-bed seats, and in many service parameters Delta has surpassed them. A few carriers in Europe, the Gulf region, and Asia may still enjoy a slight advantage over Delta because they have larger cabin crew complements and outspend the US giant where in-flight catering is concerned; but the edge is narrowing and Delta offers many benefits which are unmatched.

Besides the new equipment, entertainment software, and sparkling new aircraft—which Delta paid for in cash (approximately \$200 million)—what truly distinguished the overall experience was the welcoming attitude of the flight service crew and their constant attention to passengers' needs. It was evident that they enjoyed their work and were not simply going through the motions. In the end, the battle is won in the cabin, and Delta has provided its front line with powerful ammunition. →

