MY SAVVY TRAVELLER

AIR NEW ZEALAND – THE HAPPIEST PLACE IN THE SKY?

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By Shannon Melnyk

The results are in and AirlineRatings.com has declared Air New Zealand top dog by its esteemed global panel of seven judges with more than 200 years of aviation experience between them. Editor-in-chief Geoffrey Thomas says the carrier excels in virtually every category, in what he describes as an extraordinary achievement.

> *"Air New Zealand is a clear industry leader which is remarkable when it is up against much larger global carriers", Thomas notes. "The airline is committed to excellence in all areas of its business with its employees across the globe consistently delivering exceptional customer service."*

So how did the Kiwi airline dominate celebrated carriers such as Singapore Airlines, ANA, Qantas and Cathay Pacific? We hopped on a NZ Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner long-haul from Vancouver to Auckland with a Business Premier seat that aimed to impress. Air New Zealand was the first to introduce this aircraft to the world and has built its foundation on its best known attributes: an intelligent air purification system and regulated altitude and humidity levels to combat jetlag, the coveted amount of passenger and overhead space, bigger windows and 20% better fuel efficiency, translating into cost-savings that can trickle down to customer perks in a variety of ways.

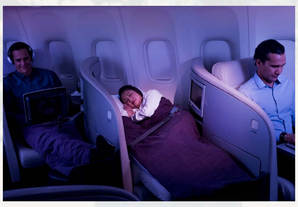
But it's the cultural nuances that make the difference on an Air NZ flight. An immediate welcome Laurent Perrier Brut set the tone for the long night ahead with notably personable service and a relaxed environment inspired by "manaakitanga", the Māori tradition of hospitality. This extends to the vast selection of award-winning New Zealand wines which include Te Pā, a refreshing stone fruit and alpine herb 2018 Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, and Selaks Founders, a toasty 2016 Bay Chardonnay with notes of white peach and nutmeg.

The ultimate boost in unique fare is lead by consulting chef and internationally acclaimed restauranteur Peter Gordon, godfather of fusion cuisine inspired by his own Maori heritage. For a starter and entrée, we selected both the Ahia ™ manuka smoked blue moki and the tea-smoked salmon in order to experience the sustainably sourced and freshly smoked fish prepared in the traditions of their partners, the people of Ngati Porou. The effort is appreciated, not to mention tasty and delicate.

As night approached we sampled the considerable entertainment options with global reach. Complementary noise-reduction headphones were a pleasurable gateway to newly released TV, movies, games and indie music playlists. An attendant later offered to transform the supple leather seats into a lie-flat bed complete with memory foam mattress, two full-size pillows and duvet. All lie-flat beds have direct aisle access, so no one was disturbed in their sleep. We were hoping to try the newly launched temperature-regulating pillows – a highly anticipated extra courtesy of Air New Zealand's partnership with NASA, but were told these were launched on the Chicago route and would make its way to other flights in the coming months.

Morning brought a fresh mango, banana, peach and chia smoothie along with the scent of cinnamon and buckwheat pancakes with dory plum compote and vanilla bean yogurt – proving to be the crowd favourite of all the sweet and savoury selections. On the remainder of the seamless flight, an ottoman footrest doubled as guest seating proved handy for a morning meeting with a colleague from several rows down.

We're told Air New Zealand won't be resting on their laurels, but instead will be introducing even more incentives to fly this award-winning brand. More innovations, particularly in the wellness space are to come, so stay tuned.



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