

Travelers facing tougher times ahead

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Manhattan Commercial Realty Co., puts it: "I still have to be where I have to be."

The following stories detail how three New Yorkers—the president of a large apparel company, a real estate executive and an entrepreneur of a startup—are coping with the constant pummeling they endure when they're on the road.

SCHEDULING HASSLES

Busy dealmaker sticks with first or business class

FLIGHT REDUCTIONS have made it tough for time-starved Dawn Robertson to schedule multiple meetings on a business trip and get an evening flight home.

"Before, you could fly into a city, fly out the same day and get a lot of work done," says Ms. Robertson, the recently named president of Sean John, hip-hop mogul Sean Combs' clothing company. "Now it's a challenge to get all the appointments in."

Ms. Robertson's solution to these trying times of travel: She flies only in first or business class. Price is not an obstacle for the former head of Old Navy.

But even premium seats are being pinched by all the cutbacks.

In August, as Ms. Robertson hurtled through the sky from San Francisco to New York to start her new job, a flight attendant handed her a scrawny meal of cheese, grapes and crackers.

"What we used to get in the back of the plane, we now get in the front of the plane," she says.

Ms. Robertson has had some



JOHN CALABRESE

'What we used to get in the back of the plane, we now get in the front'

—Dawn Robertson, Sean John

success finding alternatives to the big airlines. She has increasingly flown Virgin America, which has newer airplanes, power outlets at every seat—and touch screens that allow passengers to order food and have it delivered to their seats. The downside is that Virgin has a limited number of domestic routes.

She's also given up on shuttle service along the Boston-New York-Philadelphia corridor. "I would have never thought of taking [Amtrak's] Acela before," Ms.

Robertson says. "But it's faster, easier and a lot less stressful."

SMALL VICTORIES

Savvy broker scores savings on the road

WORKING THE SYSTEM to get the best prices is Mr. Bielsky's forte. A frequent traveler, the real estate executive signed up for a program that guarantees him a medium-size car from Thrifty Inc., his regular car-rental agency. He is sometimes able to pay less by renting a car for a full week than for the three days he actually uses the vehicle.

When it comes to hotel-room rates, the savvy traveler looks online for the cheapest deals and compares them to the hotels he prefers.

"I then call the corporate office of my [preferred] hotel, explain that I have a track record with them and ask them to knock something off the price," he says. His approach usually nets a discount or a



'My rental car has 20,870 miles. That's ridiculous'

—Robert Bielsky, Manhattan Commercial Realty Co.

bigger room or both, he boasts.

Such small victories help to compensate for frustrations beyond his control. In recent months, Mr. Bielsky's car-rental costs have been rising and not just because of high fuel prices.

A recent Ovation Travel Group survey, for example, found that the average cost of renting a car for a day increased by 5% in the second quarter of 2008, compared with a year ago.

Mr. Bielsky has noticed that the cars are also older and have higher mileage than they did in the past. He worries that the high mileage makes breakdowns more likely.

"I'm sitting in a rental car now that has 20,870 miles on it," he said recently while he was on a business trip in Fort Meyers, Fla. "That's ridiculous."

TECH SOLUTIONS

Web guru relies on gadgets

FOR INTERNET entrepreneur Jason Olim, the key to low-stress business travel these days is twofold: He starts with low expectations and maintains an upbeat attitude. On a recent Continental flight from Seattle to New York, Mr. Olim kept his cool when he found himself in a seat with a broken television screen.

Instead of complaining, he simply whipped out his iPod and watched a movie.



'At some level, I've gotten good at not noticing what goes on around me'

—Jason Olim, Freshman Fund

"In this age of technology, if you can't insulate yourself from travel, you haven't bought enough technology," says Mr. Olim, who founded and owns Freshman Fund Inc., a Manhattan-based gift registry for college-savings plans.

The shoestring budget for his year-old startup doesn't allow him to stay in many hotels. In San Francisco, he stays with friends; in Philadelphia, with his parents and high school friends; and in Washington, D.C., with his sister.

Mr. Olim uses his frequent-flyer status to board planes early and avoid the stampede. Once he's in his seat, he envelops himself in a cocoon by watching a movie or doing work.

"At some level, I've gotten good at not noticing what goes on around me," he says.

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First-class fliers frustrated

Loyal customers lose patience with airlines' service slashes despite perks

BY MARGARET JAWORSKI

CORPORATE TRAVEL must be reaching an all-time low if even first- and business-class airline passengers, among the most pampered customers, have joined the chorus of complainers.

Their mounting dissatisfaction concerns a number of issues, including inadequate legroom on long flights, discourteous customer service, pricey tickets and stingy mileage programs.

As a result, these big spenders are now more likely to shop around for their flights than stick with an airline because it's the carrier they've always

flown or they're part of a mileage program, say industry experts. That's bad news for the airlines, which count on these lucrative travelers for more than half of their revenues.

"Fliers used to be loyal to a particular airline," says Jeff Clarke, chief executive of Travelport, one of the world's largest travel-service providers. "But now we're seeing that they are willing to switch carriers."

Seeing red

FOR SIMON KELLY, the chief operating officer of Story Worldwide, a global marketing agency, the in-flight experience is satisfying enough. But what makes him see red is the "unfriendly and inflexible" ticketing experience, particularly when he has to change a flight. The frustration is so great, says Mr. Kelly, who flies every six weeks between New York and London on British Airways, that he'd switch airlines if he hadn't already accrued so many

frequent-flyer miles in BA's Executive Club program.

High fuel costs have caused airlines to cut expenses in a myriad of ways that irritate customers, such as downgrading the value of frequent-flyer miles, tacking on upgrade fees, reducing routes and slashing customer service.

Passengers, who pay premium prices for prime real estate on a flight, expect at the very least to be comfortable. If the carrier doesn't meet their standards, it's a deal-breaker. Dane Steele Green, chief executive of New York-based Steele Luxury Travel, won't be parking his 6 feet 2 inch frame in Delta Air Lines' domestic first-class cabin again soon. When he flew from Los Angeles to New York on the airline in July, the experience left him aggravated. "My knees could literally touch the seat in front of me," he says. "Honestly, I don't care if their seats are made out of cloth or leather," he adds. "Give me legroom."

THE LONG HAUL

Perks of flying first class versus business class on long-haul flights

■ 10 TO 30 INCHES more legroom

■ 1 TO 2 EXTRA INCHES of seat width

■ LARGER PERSONAL TVs with more viewing options

■ EXTENDED seat reclining

SOURCE: SEATGURU.COM

But legroom doesn't come cheap. The average lowest midweek business-class ticket on American Airlines starts at \$4,617, while the price tag for Virgin Atlantic's more leg-friendly seats (all of which are business class) is about \$7,140. The industry average for a first-class New York-London seat is \$10,000.

Luxe amenities cushion high fares

TO COMPENSATE for some of the areas of service they're eliminating, airlines are offering over-the-top amenities. Whether it helps the carriers gain back goodwill remains to be seen.

In February, United Airlines installed flatbed sleepers in business-class for long-haul flights, added menus by celebrity chef Charlie Trotter and made 150 hours of entertainment available for viewing on 15-inch personal screens. On Lufthansa, premium passengers enjoy such extras as sushi boxes.

Virgin Atlantic recently eliminated its signature onboard massage and manicure service, but passengers can get haircuts, shaves and massages at the Cowshed spa at the Virgin Clubhouse at London's Heathrow Airport. Upper Class fares on Virgin Atlantic include a complimentary chauffeur-driven car to or from the airport.

Business-class travelers on American's Boeing 767 nonstop service from New York to San Francisco, Los Angeles and Miami can now surf the Internet and check e-mail via broadband service onboard. Delta plans to install broadband service in 133 jets this fall, and Virgin America expects to have an Internet system in place by the end of the year.

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