

Airports Provide Nap Time for Weary in Nordic Designer Pods



Helsinki, where millions of travelers change plane each year en route between Western Europe and Northeast Asia, this month became the third airport after Abu Dhabi and Dubai to install GoSleep Pods, six foot by two foot capsules in which the weary are invited to snooze in light- and sound-proof comfort. Source: Finnavia Oyj

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Faced with a cross-continent voyage from their home in eastern Finland to a Turkish holiday resort, Hanna Nuutinen and husband Tuomo Hakkarainen were confronted with a common parenting quandary: how to fit in a nap.

“Our daughter will soon turn three and we were thinking how do we handle this,” Nuutinen, a 32-year-old career adviser, said in an interview. The solution came in the form of Helsinki Airport’s latest

passenger feature, the designer sleeping pod the size of a large bath tub, complete with a blind to conceal the occupant, a charging point for phones and a luggage compartment under the cocoon's reclining seat.

With more people transiting between flights on inter-continental trips, their bodyclocks often wildly out of sync with local time, a new range of air-side sleeping options has sprung up to offer guaranteed shuteye from as little as \$10.

Helsinki, where millions change plane each year en route between Western Europe and cities including Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo, last month became the third airport after Abu Dhabi and Dubai to install GoSleep Pods, six foot by two foot capsules in which the weary can snooze in light- and sound-proof comfort.

For vacation-bound Nuutinen and Hakkarainen the pods offered the isolation needed to help their daughter Nea drop off for a half hour while they waited to board their flight.

"This is part of developing as a hub," Heikki Koski, vice president for passenger management at Helsinki Airport-owner Finavia Oyj, said in an interview. "We have to serve those customers who simply want good access to the gates, travelers who want to shop, families -- and people who need a nap."

Crossroads

Products such as the GoSleep Pod have matured beyond mere gimmicks with the rise of hubs whose business models revolve around attracting transit passengers. More than 80 percent of people using Dubai International are switching between flights after local carrier Emirates built its base into a crossroads for travel between Europe and the eastern U.S. and Asia, Africa, Australia and other destinations in the Middle East.

In Helsinki, some 2.5 million passengers used the airport to transit between flights in 2014, up 100,000 from a year earlier. Finnair Oyj has sought to boost its share of the lucrative long-haul travel market by encouraging people to choose its hub to connect with the shortest possible European flights to Northeast Asia.

Helsinki is the world's third-best airport for catching a snooze air-side of the security barrier, according to the SleepingInAirports.com website.

Singapore Changi and South Korea's Incheon International Airport are ranked one and two respectively, while Vancouver, at fifth, is the only North American terminal in the top ten.

Refuge From Delays

Following a trial two years ago, Helsinki airport has 19 permanent pods and may add more depending on demand, Koski said. The capsules are a simpler and less costly alternative to the air-side hotels on offer at some other terminals, he said, while declining to comment on the installation expenses.

Typical customers in Helsinki are transfer passengers who use the capsules for one to two hours between flights, or people faced with disruptions or delays. A handful of pods will come free through the spring to encourage people to experiment with them, with the rest costing 9 euros (\$9.70) an hour.

Abu Dhabi, the first airport to become a GoSleep client in 2014, provides pod users with a disposable headrest cover, pillows and a blanket, while eye shades, earplugs and sleep socks available for an additional charge.

Snooze Cubes, Napcabs

Other hubs in Asia, Europe and the U.S. are interested in the product, said Jussi Piispanen, its co-inventor, who reckons the company will install between 500 and 1,000 this year. Before the capsules were available, people looking for a safe and secure rest between flights faced a choice between “expensive hotels or nothing at all,” he said in an interview.

In addition to its GoSleep pods, Dubai also offers 10 so-called Snooze Cubes, which are larger at almost 8 feet by six feet and pitched as “micro hotel rooms.” The boxes, made in New Zealand, are decorated with full-height photos of holiday destinations, with ceilings showing a blue sky and clouds.

At Munich airport, ranked fourth for air-side snoozing by SleepingInAirports, eight container-like “Napcab” cabins with Wi-Fi and device charging are available in Terminal 2. With a swipe of a credit card users get two hours of rest for 30 euros, with prices dropping between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.

‘Dead Tired’

“Our typical guests is just dead tired and not in a position to go anywhere else,” Napcabs spokesman Joerg Pohl said. Usage generally spans two or three hours during the day and five or six hours at night. Sixty percent of clients are traveling on business and most are transit passengers, though the cabins are popular during delays.

For travelers seeking rather more space and comfort, one of Munich's VIP lounges offers the "Nymphenburg Castle" suite at 190 euros for the first hour and as much as 1,050 euros for a full day.

While the comforts of bed have an obvious appeal to the travel-weary, airports have competing priorities, with a sleeping passenger ultimately of less financial benefit to airport companies than a wide-awake one able to eat and shop. Even for a passenger, it's a benefit that may not outweigh other considerations, like the draw of a discounted ticket.

"It's easier to travel with a child if there are proper places to have a nap," Nuutinen said. "But these beds wouldn't determine our choice of airport."

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