

TRANSPORT > AIRLINES

The Finnish Solution to More Humane U.S.-to-Europe Airline Travel

Colin Nagy, Skift - Jun 06, 2016 6:45 am



Departures hall at Helsinki's Vantaa airport. Simbe90 / Flickr

SKIFT TAKE

Flying to Europe from the east coast is almost always a pain, but Finnair may be the analgesic.

— Colin Nagy

Heading to Europe from the States? A slight northern detour can save some pain, and add some culture

Flying to Europe from the east coast is almost always a pain. Those doing the trip frequently swear by the day flight leaving in the morning, and burning a day to arrive in the evening for a good night's sleep. Everything else is an annoying red-eye, with never enough time to rest. And, if you are connecting onto Europe, be prepared for the hot mess that is any morning connection at Heathrow.

Fast track, in this case, is a boldfaced lie. Morning connections at this key European hub resemble an undignified scrum, with surly security screeners shaking you down for that stray chapstick in your carry-on (not kidding) as you rush for a connection. As I've said before, how this many incoming 777's and a380s can surprise anyone to the extent that it does, day in and day out, is beyond me.

Instead, here's a counter proposal. Take Finnair flight 6 out of Kennedy around 6pm, have a longer flight time by an hour and a half where you can eat something, settle in, and still get a decent six hours shuteye as opposed to the four hours before they turn the lights on (if you're lucky) into Heathrow. Then, transfer in arguably the most efficient airport in Europe. A recent connection at Helsinki Vantaa made me think how I would gladly trade an extra hour of flight time and sleep in the air, for an hour in an undignified transfer line, with a painful shuttle bus schlep between terminals at Heathrow.

In addition to being all enclosed in one very convenient terminal, Vantaa is very Finnish. And it works wonders. There's clear signage, good lounges, the ability to buy a gift at Marimekko or something else interesting, and security and customs that aren't ever log jammed. Everything hums with a competent efficiency.

Plus, the beauty of this entire experience — both on the plane and in the airport — is you're dealing with a national carrier and a place that still has a strong national identity. On the flight, you're being served your drink in iconic Iltala glassware with Marimekko pillows and accoutrement, served Finlandia vodka on the rocks, and generally feel like you're not in some liminal, global homogenized bubble that can characterize other carriers and airports. There's an abundance of character which counts for a lot these days.

Inflight service can be best described as efficient and sturdy — not a ton of Middle Eastern or Asian-style cooing and coddling, but it gets the job done. When you're transferring the reverence for all things Finnish continues — there's a sauna in the Finnair lounge, and the food is good, interesting, and largely local. If you have a decent layover, it is quite easy put your bags in a locker plane side, and then exit to train into the city for some shopping. No fuss, no bother. Imagine leaving your bags plane side at Heathrow? Not happening.

The entire experience is breath of fresh arctic air, and worth considering as you're heading to Europe over the summer or in the future.



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