

THE RISE of the MIDDLE CLASS

AS CROWDING IN COACH
SQUEEZES THE FUN OUT
OF FLYING—AND FIRST-
AND BUSINESS-CLASS

PRICES SOAR—TRAVELERS ARE FINDING RELIEF IN
THE INCREASINGLY POPULAR PREMIUM ECONOMY
CLASS. **WILLIAM J. MCGEE** SURVEYS 11 AIRLINES
AND FINDS THAT A LITTLE MORE MONEY
CAN MAKE A HUGE DIFFERENCE



FLIERS LONG AGO RESIGNED THEMSELVES TO THE SAD TRUTH that coach is a class to be endured, not enjoyed. In fact, ever since American Airlines abandoned its “more room throughout coach” campaign in October 2004, taking back the three to five extra inches of legroom it had offered passengers, lengthy flights in economy on virtually every carrier have seemed a cruel and unavoidable form of confinement: Until recently, the only

Not Business as Usual

MAXJET IS A GIANT STEP UP FROM PREMIUM ECONOMY—BUT AT A COMPARABLE PRICE.

WILLIAM J. MCGEE COMPARES IT TO TOP-RATED VIRGIN TO SEE HOW HIGH YOU CAN FLY FOR LESS

The price of a business-class ticket between New York and London came within reach of many more travelers last fall, when Maxjet, a Dulles, Virginia-based all-business-class carrier began service with flights from New York's Kennedy to London's Stansted (flights from Washington's Dulles were added in April). Round-trip fares currently start at \$1,500—less than a third of what most other airlines charge for business class on the same route.

Maxjet fills a niche between premium econo-

my and business class in terms of not just amenities (it offers fewer than most carriers' business class) but also price. For example, when we compared fares for the New York-London route, a long weekend planned two months in advance cost \$1,624 on Maxjet. This was \$200 more than for Virgin's premium economy class but about half the cost of its Upper Class. Similarly, we were able to purchase a ticket two weeks in advance for \$1,799 on Maxjet, in the same range as Virgin's premium economy (\$1,957) but exponentially cheaper than Upper Class (\$7,318).

To find out how much luxury \$1,500 buys, we compared the Maxjet experience with that on Virgin's Upper Class, the highest rated business-class cabin among *Condé Nast Traveler* readers. In short, while Maxjet's seats can't top the podlike suites in Upper Class, and its amenities aren't equal to Virgin's long list (which includes eat-when-you're-hungry meal service and in-flight massages), Maxjet passengers get plenty of space and excellent service at a fraction of the cost. Those for whom money is a consideration would do well to try Maxjet.

\$1,799

MAXJET

NYC-London Round-trip

THE CABINS AND SEATS

Passengers on Maxjet won't find the space and seat comfort offered in European and Asian premium cabins, but the Maxjet experience is on a par with the best business-class cabins on any U.S. airline.

- 👍 Spotlessly clean and cheery interiors with pale-blue leather seats.
- 👍 60 inches of pitch, 19 inches of width (about 2 inches more than most coach seats), footrests, and 160 degrees of recline.
- 👍 Roomy 767s with only 102 seats (most carriers fill the same aircraft with nearly twice as many).
- 👎 No power ports—a major oversight for an airline serious about catering to business travelers.

THE SERVICE

While crew on most domestic carriers seem to have forgotten the fine art of hospitality, Maxjet's staff couldn't have been more welcoming. Flight attendants were ever-present but not overbearing and were eager to serve.

- 👍 **Meals:** Very good (fillet of beef, braised lamb, or baked salmon) and certainly comparable to business-class meals served on most U.S. airlines.
- 👍 **Entertainment:** A portable digEplayer with a hundred hours of movies, music, and TV programming.
- 👍 **Bonus:** Noise-canceling headphones are a welcome touch.
- 👎 **Quibble:** Maxjet offers a fairly limited selection of dishes that doesn't change often; the carrier says it is rethinking the menu.

ON THE GROUND

Flights land at Stansted, a comparatively quiet airport where security, customs, and immigration lines are conveniently short.

- 👍 **The welcome:** Passengers can use the gym and showers at the airport's SAS Radisson, but only after they shell out \$17.
- 👍 **The trip to town:** By taxi, \$145 and 70 minutes. By train, \$24 and about 45 minutes.

THE BOTTOM LINE

You get more than you pay for and won't find more space—or better service—at anywhere near this low a price. For travelers who place a premium on comfort and value, Maxjet won't disappoint.

\$7,318

VIRGIN ATLANTIC UPPER CLASS

NYC-London Round-trip

THE CABINS AND SEATS

Virgin's Upper Class Suite offers room to spare, a fully flat bed, and enough amenities to satisfy the most demanding CEO or celebrity.

- 👍 79.5-inch-long flat bed and a 22-inch-wide seat—roomier than those in many first-class cabins.
- 👍 Contoured walls for privacy when sleeping.
- 👍 Power ports, oodles of storage space, and an ottoman that doubles as a seat for a guest.
- 👎 Having to crane your neck to see out the window.

THE SERVICE

Sipping a cocktail at the onboard Upper Class bar and being waited on by attentive staff is like traveling back to the days when flying was an occasion to celebrate. Once we were tucked into our cushy Upper Class Suite, it only got better.

- 👍 **Meals:** Food served whenever requested and equal to that in a good restaurant (the butternut squash ravioli was superb); hot chocolate and coconut macaroons at bedtime.
- 👍 **Entertainment:** Video on-demand movies and television programs shown on a large (10.4-inch-wide) screen.
- 👍 **Bonus:** Complimentary pajamas and a goody bag stuffed with top-notch toiletries.
- 👍 **Ecstasy:** The free massage.

ON THE GROUND

At Heathrow, Virgin's Upper Class passengers have a designated lane for customs and immigration, cutting an often interminable wait to less than 20 minutes.

- 👍 **The welcome:** A hot shower and hot breakfast at Virgin's airport lounge.
- 👍 **The trip to town:** Less than an hour via the complimentary car service.

THE BOTTOM LINE

You get what you pay for. More departures (five New York-London flights daily versus one) and mileage benefits give Virgin a considerable edge over Maxjet for frequent business fliers. For anyone whose company is footing the bill—or for whom money is no object—Upper Class is hard to beat for convenience and luxury.

TICKER TAPE

An estimated 800 to 2,000 languages are spoken in Africa.