

United 787 First Day of Flight, A Passengers Perspective

Brian T. Coleman (Nov 5th, 2012)

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Unfortunately I was not able to fly the inaugural Houston to Chicago flight on Nov 4th, but I was onboard the Los Angeles - Houston segment later in the day. The following day I flew home on UAL 1243, another 787 flight.

Upon boarding the 787, you feel the sense of spaciousness. The cabin is very large and the LED lighting gives a futuristic feel to the interior. (It was much larger than what I was expecting... regardless of what the actual measurements are.) Your eyes are drawn to the ceiling, which seems so far above. The plane also feels wider than other wide bodies... like the sister 777. The boarding process seemed to go much faster as well. Not sure why, but with every seat occupied, we were ready for pushback well ahead of the allotted time. (Didn't matter as we were delayed for maintenance issues, but we were ready to go in what seemed like record time.)

As nice as the 787 is, it was not without its issues. Some of these are a result of opening day jitters and others a result of confusion, to me, decisions made by United or Boeing. For example, one could not clearly hear the PA announcements. It's not as though the pilot or flight attendant weren't speaking clearly, it was a volume issue. They need to pump up the volume for these announcements to be heard. However, the safety briefing was of acceptable volume and there are some automated announcements that were plenty loud. It's interesting hearing an announcement by the flight attendant and then have something broadcast by what is clearly a prerecorded message.

I was seated in United's Business First cabin, seat 5A on the outbound flight. The seat was comfortable and I especially like the fact I could individually control the seat back and foot rest. I have a bad back and I enjoy having my feet raised while having the seatback in the full and upright position. This seat, unlike others, accommodates this position. However, the cutout for my feet was very small. My feet aren't that large but I was unable to put both of my feet together in the cutout. Other seats don't have this issue and the "Cabin Systems and Interiors" supervisor who was also on my flight confirmed the foot rest area might be an issue for some passengers. I hope Seat Guru.com will note these 'limitations' for us passengers who are 6' and

taller. My only other comment about the seat is that the seat walls seem pretty thin and flexible. Whenever the guy in front of me moved, I could feel the seat flex against my feet. This isn't really an issue but something not present on other aircraft. I'm not sure if this would be bothersome on a long international flight?

The window was very large and much appreciated for those of us who like to enjoy the view outside. The automatic dimming control works well but I'm concerned it will not block out enough sun when it's bright outside. (Both of my flights were in the late afternoon / evening and I really couldn't tell how well this feature will work.) I'm also not sure how well these switches and technology will hold up over time. It seems like there are just too many things that can go wrong, but for now they are fun to play with.

The IFE (In Flight Entertainment) system worked well and there were many movies and other programs to choose from. There was also an interactive map to track the progress of our flight. The large screen was touch enabled, but it doesn't support multi-gesturing like your modern smartphone. As more and more of us are familiar with multi-gesturing, it's a shame United didn't take advantage of this user interface. Instead, you had to use your seat side control gismo (Nintendo like game controller) to navigate the screen as well as your overhead light and other items. Another really nice feature of the IFE system is its ability to individually reboot. When someone had an issue with their system, and on opening day it happened often, the flight attendant was able to reboot just their system. This was great because the rest of the cabin was completely unaffected by the reboot.

The overhead bins are very large and can accommodate carryon bags differently than other bags. If you remember way back when, you had to position your roll aboard sideways. Then the airlines got smart and elongated the overhead bins and you could place the bags flat either wheels or handle first. On the 787 you should place your roll aboard on its side – handle or wheels first. The thinness of your bag and the oversized bins will accommodate more luggage. I see this as a training issue for the public and I'm sure the flight attendants will be repositioning a lot of bags until the flying public get properly 'trained' on the new position.

United says the airplane is pressurized to a lower altitude (I believe 6,000 feet instead of the normal 8,000) and there is a higher level of humidity in the air. There are also more / special air filters to keep the cabin air clean. The flight wasn't long enough to really notice or benefit from any of these changes, but I did notice that my ears never popped during the flight. I never had the sense of pressure in my ears the way I do on other flights. I guess the lower pressure really is an added benefit!

The engines that power the 787 are new. They have been engineered to be very quiet and the interior was noticeably more quiet than other aircraft. However, the startup process will vibrate and shake the plane for about 30 seconds... then when they get up to speed the vibration goes away. This seems to be a feature of the engine. Hopefully newer version of the engine will resolve this issue.

Regarding onboard service, United did not make any friends with their selection of food for this flight. We had a choice of 1 snack option, although the flight was listed as dinner service. The Mediterranean Salad was very interesting to say the least. There was a large bowl of hummus, a small plate of couscous and rice. Red peppers garnished the side of the plate along with a bag of Stacy's Pita Chips. Although I found the food tasty, many of my fellow passengers were very displeased with the choice. Some asked for a snack box from Economy but were told they would have to purchase the box.

I asked a flight attendants about charging for snack boxes, especially when the food choice was so limited and potentially unappealing to some. She told me it is a new policy at United. Flight attendants have been told they have to charge Business / First passengers for anything they bring forward from economy. Hopefully there will be a very loud public outcry and United will reverse this policy. If I'm paying a small fortune for my ticket, the least United can do is spring for a snack when the main meal is so unappealing.

The lavatories are very clean and modern. One will appreciate any of the three ways to flush the toilet. You can do it the old fashion way by pressing a button, you can wave your hand in front of a motion sensor or you can simply close the lid. Yes, closing the lid will cause the toilet to flush! I especially like this feature as I've entered other lavatories and got to see the results of my fellow passenger. An automatic flush is a great and much appreciated addition.

The sink has a modern touch selector for water temperature. You press a button to make the water hotter or colder. You don't have to worry about the water squirting out at an ungodly rate to splash the front of your pants either. As with the entire United fleet, the paper towels are super thin. They give onion paper a run for their money. I can't wait for United to go back to the thicker paper towels. I can't imagine the thinner towels saving the company any money as passengers simply use more of the thinner paper towels.

The lavatory to the left of the door from which you enter is HUGE! I was told all new aircraft have to have a handicap accessible lavatory. I'm not sure if this is true as I've never seen one on any other aircraft but this lavatory is worth standing in line to use. I've been in NYC hotel rooms that were smaller than this lavatory! The other lavatories on the plane are standard size. The only issue I see with this jumbo sized room and baby changing table is that some passengers might decide to make it a room for 2 and join the mile high club... if you know what I mean. The one thing that might dissuade some is its location. Maybe this is why United decided to locate it where they did. It's in a very publically viewable area... unlike the lavatories on the 777 in First Class or the upper deck lavs on the 747 which I've heard have been used for Club initiations.

I had the opportunity to view the pilot rest area which is located behind the cockpit door. After a short walk up some steps, there are two single beds and a jump seat in the cabin. It seems like a very nice area for the pilots to get some rest on their long international flights. Although I didn't get to see it, they told me the crew rest area is similar in configuration but contains 6 beds. This is located at the rear of the plane.

On my two flights, there were 4 pilots on board each flight. Two flying the 787 and 2 continuing their education. As United has taken delivery of the second plane and will put it into service soon, this one the job experience is invaluable. Simulators can only go so far and seeing how it handles first hand is great.

The cockpit is spacious and anyone who has been in one will notice the reductions of switches, levers and breakers. They have been replaced with glass cockpit instrumentation and a heads up display. Yes, like a modern jet fighter, the 787 has a heads up display. The pilots I talked with said the 787 was nicer to fly than their 777's but it's more complicated. During my two flights, I was able to talk with 5 pilots who are certified to fly the 787. All of them are International 777 pilots and they averaged 27 years of flying experience. They all said the 787 is a dream to fly and they are very much looking forward to getting the plane on International routes. (Right now the 787 is limited to domestic routes as they work out the kinks.)

There is a lot more I can write about the cockpit and the comments of the pilots about the plane but this article is about the passenger experience.

All in all it was a great flight and the crew took very good care of us. They were all seasoned international 777 flight attendants and they were getting used to the short duration of a domestic

flight. The flight from Houston to LAX is just under 3 hours. The service United provides on International flights is different than the domestic service and it shows. For example the flight attendants were looking for table linens and cognac glasses... not provided on domestic flights. So we had to 'suffer' with our trays on bare tables and the consumption of cognac out of wine glasses.

For the privilege of flying on the 787, I'll endure these hardships.

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1K passenger with over 2 million actual flight miles on United.

This might be a different version... but then again, it might be the same as I didn't do a compare.
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