



FLYING DUBAI TO LONDON WITH GULF AIR: LOW-COST BUSINESS FARE MARRED BY SIX-HOUR DELAY

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Flying to London from Dubai with a stopover is not a journey a business traveller is likely to make in place of a direct flight.

But Gulf Air provides two solid reasons to fly via Bahrain: a highly competitive business class fare of Dh7,920, less than half the price of its main rivals; and personal service on smaller planes that harks back to the carrier's golden age in the 1970s and '80s.

At first I was wowed by the Dubai to Manama leg, which benefits from Dubai International Airport's most recent addition, Concourse D – basically a complete redevelopment of Terminal One – where Gulf Air has a new lounge.

True there was only an Arabic and not western breakfast option but it is a little haven to read the newspapers or access emails from the free, fast Wi-Fi, and it is decorated with vintage photographs of the airline's golden age.

On board, the seats with enough leg room for a giraffe and only four across the width of the A321 aircraft did seem to recapture some of the airline's former glamour, as did the smiling cabin attendant ready with dates and Arabic coffee.

My experience was somewhat marred, however, by a six-hour delay in Bahrain – five in the airport and another on the aircraft whose engine had developed a technical fault.

As business class, or "Falcon Gold" passengers, we retreated to the smart Gulf Air lounge for refreshments. But a few fellow travellers were annoyed by the lack of adequate announcements. A delay of one-and-a-half hours was shifted to three and then finally to five.

To be fair, it's hard to know how long fixing an engine will take and with a fleet of only 28 aircraft in total, there is unlikely to be a spare standing by.

When we took off, the business class to London in the A330 was slightly less spacious with six seats across the aircraft. It is divided into two sections and on that day mine was half-filled with children, not an ideal working environment. Gulf Air has designated Sky Nannies to keep order though. A screen can be raised for reasonable privacy between seats and you do have a universal plug for charging electronic devices.

On landing, my "priority" baggage must have been one of the last off the plane before I headed into central London on the Heathrow Express to finally complete my 18-hour door-to-door journey.

q&a sky chef cooks up a feast

How was the return journey?

The aircraft left on time and the Sky Chef Cedric quickly whipped up a supper of coriander and curry soup followed by grilled salmon and saffron rice. I transformed the seat into a bed and slept solidly for five hours on a slight incline until the smell of coffee woke me for a light breakfast before landing in Bahrain. There was a tight connection, but both my bag and I made it back to Dubai slightly ahead of schedule.

Tell me more about the Sky Chef.

I last flew Gulf Air in 1997, when it first launched the concept and thankfully this clever innovation has survived the ups and downs of the airline's fortunes since then. Dressed in his kitchen whites, this enthusiastic chap does his best to enhance the service and presentation of the food. He was apologetic about not being able to do me a rare steak, but wheeled a mean dessert trolley.

You mention Gulf Air's mixed fortunes. What are they?

Gulf Air was the main regional carrier in the 1970s and '80s with Bahrain, Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Oman as equal shareholders. Qatar was the first to leave in 2002 to concentrate on Qatar Airways, followed by Abu Dhabi to launch Etihad in 2003 and Oman in 2007. From 2008 to 2012, the company lost an average of US\$500 million each year, although the last reported figures show a reduced loss, of \$346 million.

Is there a lounge in London Heathrow Airport?

A spacious lounge in Terminal Four, shared with Oman Air and Kuwait Airways, offers attentive service and a well-equipped business centre.

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