

Tried and Tested

FLIGHT CHECK NEW YORK JFK-MUMBAI CHHAPATRI SHIVAJI



FIRST IMPRESSIONS Only three people were ahead of me at check-in for Air India's inaugural flight from New York's JFK to Mumbai's Chhapatri Shivaji International Airport. Though Terminal 4 was a hubbub of international passengers and tortuously winding lines, check-in for this Executive Class flight was exemplary. I was issued a boarding pass and invitation to the lounge after staff scanned my renewed, electronic passport at a laptop station manned by Air India employees.

Security was a roadblock. Despite shoe-horning myself into the snaking line with my Executive Class pass, a LAN flight was in danger of leaving half its passengers, who were shunted through ahead of me and all others on my Air India flight—even the crew. People flying Emirates and Singapore were similarly crammed into a small space waiting for a security station logjam to get us through. I spent about 45 minutes in the process.

The lounge was fresh and cheerful, offering a fair selection of liquor with some mixers and red and white wines of limited pedigree. A single-serve coffee machine waited above a cooler full of juices, bottled waters, and sodas. To the right of the bar were two heated display cases. I knew I would feel at home in India when I saw that the hot snacks therein were separated into “veg” and “non-veg.” Near the hotcases were plates of chutneys, beside which were assorted bagged Indian snacks that turned out to be quite fresh. Though only light fare, the snack items were tasty. I enjoyed them amid the bouquets of flowers and religious statuary that bordered the room, and was

happy that the television was turned towards a small cluster of couches rather than the room at large. Besides that, two public computers stood in opposing carrels, near a stand of international newspapers and magazines. Wired Internet was available.

BOARDING We boarded the sparkling-new Boeing 777-200 late, about 25 minutes before the flight was scheduled to leave. A general boarding line could be circumvented by anyone waving an Executive Class or first-class pass; there were no separate lines. All passengers boarded through the nose of the plane, which meant that first-class and Executive Class fliers had families and luggage bustling past them. Orange juice, apple juice and water were distributed. Given the famous JFK delays, we left 40 minutes after we taxied into the line.

SEAT COMFORT The 2-3-2 seating configuration felt roomy, in part because privacy was assisted by accordion screens that snapped with buttons to the armrest base or stuck with magnets, when raised, to the metal of the seat divider in back. Seat pitch was 76 inches, and recline was 180 degrees. The cushioning was comfortable in a firm way, and the footrest was not the sturdiest, but was adequate in any position. The in-flight entertainment offered movies, TV programs, and music tailored for both Indian and U.S. audiences. I watched a TV show about eco-artists in India, as well as “The Dirty Dozen” and “The Devil Wears Prada” during my trip. I

appreciated the inclusion of classic films like “Casablanca” in the program.

FLIGHT Drink service commenced just after takeoff, with packets of cashews and almonds alongside. The Kerala cashews were the size of medium shrimp, and quite fresh.

Problems started when we waited over an hour for our food orders. The staff somehow managed to bring me the correct meal 10 minutes after they'd brought me the wrong one; they seemed flustered, but were eager to please and very attentive, with various attendants coming by my seat no less than four times during the meal. The curried vegetable dumplings with *navratan pulao* (a seasoned rice dish with bits of fruit, vegetables and nuts) were pretty good when they finally

arrived, and the menu favored vegetarians, fish-eaters and carnivores equally. Hot towels were distributed in abundance. The staff was genuinely trying hard to provide great service, but appeared as-yet-unaccustomed to the plane and a bit nervous. At least they made up in effort what they lacked in ease.

For dessert, a lemon gateau or *semiya malai* (vermicelli cooked in sweet milk) were offered from a cart. The cabin lights were lowered thereafter and I had a fair night's rest on the comfortable lie-flat seats. I reclined my seat properly, but two traveling companions received no assistance when they were unable to recline and looked around imploringly. Another traveling companion complained that she was woken up for hot towel service.

The continental breakfast was unremarkable, and again, they realized I hadn't ordered it halfway through and brought me the correct one. Eggs and hash browns held no candle to the Southern Indian fare they eventually delivered.

ARRIVAL Arrival at Chhapatri Shivaji was effortless—I was out of the airport in just under 20 minutes, baggage claim included. The baggage claim area was chaotic, but our luggage appeared quickly, and we were gone.

VERDICT Air India still has a few wrinkles to iron out of its Executive Class service, but it's a quantum improvement on what preceded it. After some tweaking, it should be competitive with other carriers that have thrown their imposing shadows over regional routes.

—Alex Fethière