

A Little Bag of Mixed Nuts

A child, traveling to a far-off land. What's the picture? Ride to the airport, go through security - bag full of trinkets - don't wander off, get the biggest box of candy from the tax-free shop. The plane's white-and-blue livery is obvious even to the small from the boarding gate - that's Finnair. Show your ticket to the nice lady. The plane is huge! Invited to the cockpit - one pilot gives you a pack of cards, while the other listens to radio chatter. These people know flying. Their professional pride and confidence impresses even the busy child, imparting a sense of importance and safety.

What do I remember from childhood travel? The flight to Asia felt like an eternity. I'm fairly sure I ate nothing but smuggled candy and little bags of salted crackers. There were two in-flight movies, but I can't remember any of them even though flying several times per year at best. The clouds are more memorable. At least the chairs were roomy..

Fall From Grace

Finnair has a long history as one of the safest and longest-operating airlines in the world. It still has these qualities, but something is lacking. Has Finnair failed to adapt to a changing field? For a long time, Finnair was the source of much national pride to the Finns - a genuinely good company in a global and challenging field.

The atmosphere of air travel may have shifted, but the fundamentals remain the same. Finnair has not completely lost its strengths; skilled and motivated employees, excellent routes to Asia, an exemplary record in generally *doing things right*. So what's the problem? It's a bag of mixed nuts. Low-cost competitors have flooded the markets with cheap flights. Tough times have strained the relationship between the company and its employees. Hard decisions have been made - many of them sacrificing the seemingly small things for small savings. However, the small things are often what define customer experience. They are what differentiate service-oriented airlines from each other. A genuinely helpful cabin crew, serving unusually good meals, a pilot giving the kids a pack of cards, such small displays of a motivation to do well are what end up on reviews and social media, and what make customers return over and over again. The desire to do a good job, the desire to serve the customer well, is not enough, nor is communicating that desire through marketing. The philosophy is worth nothing unless put into action.

I have never had a bad experience when flying with Finnair. There are aspects that could be better, like the food, but nothing stands out. The only bad experience is watching Finnair's fall from grace from the sidelines - its sympathetic struggle to do business in the aviation industry. Finnair seems to be going through an identity crisis, as its faced with competitors from all sides of the cost spectrum. Maybe Finnair didn't have to lose its identity, maybe there's still room for an airline that strikes a balance between luxury and practicality? An airline that provides reasonably good service for the reasonable person? To find the middle ground, there's the challenge.

Yet, even with its current troubles, Finnair is still full of potential. Small steps showing genuine effort and focus could take the stock from "risky" to "buy, buy, buy!". The next few years will be critical. A Japanese businessman delighted upon receiving green tea on his return flight to Japan, told me how the first thing he had planned on doing when arriving home was to brew green tea. Now, a year later, comments reveal that flights to Japan no longer have enough green tea to serve tourist class passengers. Meanwhile, Japan Airlines begins flying to Helsinki in 2013.