

Cost-cutting leaves stain on US airlines

Passengers face dirty cabins due to 'bring your own food' policy and staff cutbacks

ATLANTA

SEATBACK pockets hiding sticky surprises, carpets with patterns that can no longer conceal the curious stains, overripe lavatories and crevices oozing snack grit, and plain old grime.

Increasingly, that describes the modern airliner: an untidy tube hurtling through the sky full of passengers who cannot wait to

land and go wash their hands with disinfectant soap.

Cleanliness may be next to godliness, but in the US airline industry it has taken a back seat to financial survival.

Airlines, which have been paring their fleets to cut costs, are flying their jets fuller than ever – and, like New York City in the summer, some of them are just a little too crowded not to smell.

After dispensing with the expense of most meal services, airlines invited passengers to bring their own food aboard, and many planes now land littered with a smorgasbord of wrappers and leftovers.

Once on the ground, there are fewer employees to tidy up, thanks to widespread layoffs. And

planes, which make money only when they fly, sit at the gate for shorter periods, often making clean-up a rush job.

"You put your hand in the seat-back pocket and there's an open McDonald's ketchup container in there," said Mr Joe Brancatelli, a frequent flier who runs an advice website for business travellers.

He said the problem is that the airlines have made too many cuts.

When cleaning is outsourced, for instance, "it's another part of the airline business that goes to the lowest bidder", he said.

At Delta Air Lines, currently regrouping in bankruptcy, its 438 big jets had become, in the words of director of operations Tim Cavanaugh, "dingy and dirty".

While the industry standard for

deep-cleaning a jetliner – a process similar to having your car professionally detailed – is to have it done roughly every 30 days, Delta had let its schedule lapse to every 15 to 18 months.

And when outside food was invited aboard, routines for taking care of trash went awry.

"A lot of inconvenient garbage," Mr Brancatelli said. "The airlines can't control it."

More recently, bloggers, flight attendants and others have been taking note of filthy and fragrant conditions on planes; it is not clear how much of a difference some of the carriers' galvanised house-keeping efforts have made.

"There's still a long ways they have to go," said Ms Linda Hirneise, who heads the travel prac-

tice at JD Power & Associates, a market research firm.

Her company surveys passengers about airline cleanliness, and this year the top-ranked carrier – JetBlue – received an 8.49 on a 10-point scale.

But in Ms Hirneise's opinion, anything below a nine is flunking.

Delta came in third in this year's JD Power survey, behind JetBlue and Southwest. At the bottom of the survey, which ranked only North American airlines, were Northwest and US Airways.

"All carriers have room for improvement," Ms Hirneise said. "Sometimes you pull those trays down and you just want to walk off the plane."

The Federal Aviation Administration does not set cleanliness

standards, so the issue is mainly one of public perception.

"If the seat has crumbs in it, then you're probably not doing your engine maintenance – that's how people think," said Mr James Whitehurst, Delta's chief operating officer. "People are disgusted by dirty airplanes."

One reason that JetBlue and Southwest, two low-cost carriers, won high marks is that their planes are newer.

Also, though they tend to have fewer ground employees than long-established airlines like United Airlines and American Airlines, they have company cultures that encourage flight attendants, gate agents and, at JetBlue, even pilots to tidy up.

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