
Alaska Airlines launches first West Coast commercial air service to Havana

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Alaska Airlines launched the first regularly scheduled U.S. commercial flights between Los Angeles and Havana, Cuba.

"LAX is America's gateway to the world - and today, an exciting new chapter in U.S.-Cuba relations begins at our airport," said Mayor Eric Garcetti. "I am thrilled to see the first-ever commercial flight from the West Coast to Havana take off from LAX, and grateful to Alaska Airlines for helping connect Angelenos with people and cultures from around the world."

Among the passengers onboard the inaugural flight are 50 political, business and cultural leaders from California and Washington state taking part in an educational and trade mission and who are eager to learn more about the island nation.

"We sometimes overlook the fact that air travel holds tremendous power to connect people and overcome boundaries," said Joe Sprague, Alaska Airlines' senior vice president of communications and external relations. "This new West Coast service is another historic step in opening up relations between our two countries and we're thrilled to host a delegation of trade, tourism and educational leaders to explore Cuba's capital city."

Joining the more than 20 economic, trade and educational organizations taking part in Alaska Airlines' Havana delegation are Sister Cities Los Angeles Chairman Tom Gilmore and President Fabiola Vilchez. The two will begin an initial conversation regarding a city-to-city relationship between Los Angeles and Havana. Also, representatives from the University of California Los Angeles' Center for World Health joined the trip in hopes of exploring U.S. medical trials for advancements in cancer and diabetes treatments developed by Cuban doctors and medical researchers.

One of the leaders participating in the trade mission is University of Washington President Ana Mari Cauce, the first Cuban-born leader of a major American academic institution. Cauce left Cuba when she was three-years old and

went on to excel in teaching, scholarship and advocacy in the United States.

"I'm thrilled at this new spirit of openness and the opportunity for us to build greater ties with the people of Cuba," said Cauce. "We have much to share and learn about the Cuban people's work in health care and education. This visit is a high point for me personally and professionally."

Also participating in the trade mission visit is Bill Allen, President and CEO of the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation. The LAEDC is interested in learning more about the emerging private sector that is taking root in Cuba along with beginning discussions on everything from infrastructure redevelopment to increased trade.

"Travel promotes people-to-people exchanges and holds the potential to foster understanding between the peoples and cultures of our two cities," said Ernest Wooden Jr., President and CEO of Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board. "Opening up channels like this between Cuba and the West Coast through air service will further assist building these vital connections."

Havana inaugural flight isn't Alaska's first flight to Cuba

While the inaugural flight to Havana is a first for Alaska, it isn't the first time the airline has flown to Cuba. In the early 1970s, Alaska flew U.S. Military Airlift Command charter flights to the base at Guantanamo Bay, as well as charters to Caribbean locations such as Jamaica, Puerto Rico and Panama.

The Havana flight will operate using a fuel-efficient Boeing 737-900ER. Onboard, customers will enjoy Alaska's award-winning service, along with features to help make the most of their flight – for work or pleasure. Alaska Beyond Entertainment offers free and premium entertainment direct to customer devices. Other onboard amenities include a selection of food and beverage inspired by local flavors, custom leather seats with adjustable headrests, and power outlets for laptops and personal devices at every seat.

Alaska Airlines kicks off new year with new in-flight amenities, including Free Chat from any smartphone

Hot on the heels of its acquisition of California-based airline Virgin America, Alaska Airlines is debuting a complimentary new service to help fliers stay connected with friends and loved ones on the ground. Beginning today, guests on Alaska's Gogo-equipped flights can use iMessage, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger to send greetings from 35,000 feet - for free.

"We're celebrating the new year – and our new, bigger airline – with the rollout of new customer-friendly enhancements on Alaska-branded flights, starting with Free Chat," said Andrew Harrison, Alaska Airlines' executive vice president and chief commercial officer. "We know that staying in touch while on the go is essential to our guests, many of whom don't need full Internet access. Free Chat is a great way to keep that connection alive without breaking the bank. And yes, it's fully emoji-compatible."

Free Chat is the first of a variety of new in-flight products Alaska is rolling out in 2017. In addition to a brand-new Premium Class service that launched this week, Alaska is introducing a number of enhancements which guests can enjoy from any class of service. Though these products are currently limited to flights operated by Alaska Airlines, customer response and feedback will inform future cabin enhancements and offerings on Alaska Airlines, Virgin America and Horizon Air-operated flights.

"Gotta love it when your favorite airline just keeps getting better," said Russell Wilson, Seattle quarterback and Alaska's chief football officer. "I can't wait to try Free Chat on my next flight – now I can chat with my baby when I'm on the road, and stay connected to the team when I'm traveling for fun."

Additional new amenities launching this month:

- Free movies through March: To celebrate its recent merger with Virgin America and the concept of "Different Works," Alaska is offering free, unlimited access to its entire catalog of entertainment available to stream on guests' devices, including Hollywood movies and popular TV shows through March 31, 2017. New titles available to view in January include Hollywood hits Nice Guys, Mike and Dave Need Wedding Dates, X-Men Apocalypse, and Ice Age Collision Course.

- Upgraded food and beverage options: Later this month, guests will begin to see new food and drink options on the snack and beverage cart when they travel, including new premium wines from Washington State's award-winning Chateau Ste. Michelle, as well as new premium craft beer, bourbon and a sure-to-be-favorite: sparkling wine from La Marca.
- Premium Class: Alaska's new class of service debuts this week on select routes. In addition to four extra inches of legroom, passengers seated in Premium Class enjoy early boarding and complimentary snacks and alcoholic beverages. More than 40 percent of Alaska's fleet has been retrofitted with the new section, and by year-end, more than 90 percent will feature this new class of service.

"We've spent the past several years really investing in Alaska's fleet and onboard product," said Harrison. "By the end of this year, we'll have outfitted nearly half of our 737s with new, larger overhead bins with room for 48 percent more bags; most of our mainline aircraft feature custom Recaro leather seats with 110-volt and USB power at every seat; and we have the youngest airplanes of the top five U.S. airlines. This week's enhancements are just the beginning of the new features and promotions guests can expect to see us implement over the next year."

Upgrades to Alaska's new Premium Class range from \$15 to \$79, in addition to base fares, and can be purchased at the time of booking through alaskaair.com or Alaska's mobile app, during check-in, and at the airport. Alaska Mileage Plan MVP, Gold and Gold 75K members are eligible for complimentary upgrades into Premium Class at the time of booking, or up to 24 hours in advance of travel, depending on status and the fare purchased. Learn more about Premium Class at alaskaair.com. Premium Class is not currently available on flights operated by Virgin America or Horizon Air.

Free Chat launches in beta today, with full functionality deploying Jan. 24. To be among the first to try Free Chat, guests will simply need to sign into their Gogo Wi-Fi accounts and follow a few easy steps to begin chatting on their devices. Alaska is the first and only U.S. airline to offer this complimentary feature to all guests. Complimentary streaming entertainment options are available through the end of March 2017 on fliers' own devices; promotion does not apply to tablet rentals.
