

Another View

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Don't knock Ryanair - it has united Europe

Favourite country: Scotland. Favourite airport: Singapore. Favourite city: Vancouver.

So far, so predictable. But occasionally I am asked for my favourite airline, and the response is often taken to be sheer affectation: Ryanair. Yes, the airline whose boss, Michael O'Leary, is delivering "customer service" in the shape of ever-steeper fees for checked-in baggage - and is now even talking of charging for luggage that goes in your overhead locker.

There is plenty not to like about the Ryanair experience. I resent the way that the booking process seems to be constructed as a series of traps for the unwary.

Ryanair was late to the online-booking game, persisting with travel-agent sales while easyJet.com was thriving, but it now sees the internet as the first

opportunity to flog "ancillaries", starting with a £1.69 charge for a text confirmation.

Why pretend to offer me a "discount" for paying with a debit card, rather than portraying the reality that Ryanair - like its rivals - levies a credit-card surcharge? And if I want to buy overpriced travel insurance, I'll ask for it, thanks; but the airline's website requires me to know that I have to scroll down beyond Slovakia on a drop-down list in order to select "Travel Without Insure".

So how can I possibly admire an airline that makes travel so uncomfortable? Because Ryanair does something so important that its sins should be forgiven. The Irish carrier delivers safe and punctual air travel at average fares that are way below the norm, and therefore enfranchises a mass of travellers who previously were confined to overnight bus journeys from Dublin to London or Krakow to Manchester. Michael O'Leary did not reinvent a failing airline as an ultra-low-cost carrier in order to unify Europe, but that is what he has done much more successfully than any EU initiative.

Even if you are one of the many who say, "I'd never fly Ryanair," every air traveller in Europe benefits from its existence. While O'Leary's claim to be in competition with British Airways is bluster - the two compete directly on only a handful of routes - the downward pressure on fares has forced all the "flag carriers" to treat their passengers with more respect.

2 AUGUST 2013