

AVIATION: TOURIST CLASS

Advance Bookings Dispel Some Doubts About New Trans-Atlantic Service

By FREDERICK GRAHAM

THE beginning of tourist-class airline travel across the North Atlantic is still two months away but already some of the lines that were less than enthusiastic about it a few months ago are starting to wonder why it was not launched sooner. It is not only that advance bookings on the tourist class planes are running heavy for almost all of the lines. There is the added and closely related fact that advance bookings on the regular-fare planes are, in most cases, slightly greater than they were at this time last year.

All of which indicates, at least at this time, that the great bugaboo of "diversion" (which for the airlines means a shift of potential passengers from regular-fare flights to the cheaper service) might have been more imaginary than real. At any rate, "diversion" is not proving to be a problem at the beginning of the service's trial period.

The airlines that accepted the service with reservations, and only on a trial basis, maintain that the bookings for the tourist-class flights are not all as "firm" as they would like them. Some foreign-flag lines, for example, say that travel agents report a certain number of passengers wanting space but do not give names and addresses. How much duplication there may be in the reports of the various travel agencies as potential travelers shop around, the airlines admit they cannot measure. Naturally, they hope there is little or none at all.

Big Year Anyway

Other international air carriers discount—but softly—the heavy tourist-class bookings and the continued high level of regular-fare bookings by saying that this is going to be an unusual travel year. They point to the Olympic Games in Europe as one factor contributing to heavy travel this year.

There are other lines that point out that the novelty of tourist-class air travel will have a strong appeal—at least this year. Just as there are people who like to try anything new once, there are people who like to be the first to fly new air routes, new planes and new types of service. It would seem, however, that these people would not be numerous enough to make the low-cost service profitable, even for a single season.

There are still other lines that make no effort to explain the welcome, if surprising, volume of requests for the coach-type service. They only hope that it holds up.

Then, of course, there are the airlines that have felt and preached all along that tourist-class service would attract new and numerous travelers while leaving the regular-fare flights to the people who have always used them. They see the present trend as nothing more than confirmation of their long-held position.

At least two international air carriers announced last week that they would drop their first-class service and fly only air tourist across the Atlantic. Officials of El Al, Israel Airlines, said they believe that tourist rates will increase air travel to Europe so greatly that the low-cost service will produce more revenue than a combination of both types of fare.

Tourist Class Only

Trans Canada Air Lines officials said that line had decided to start the new trend across the Atlantic only with air coach rates. It has received permission from the International Air Transport Association to operate its first-class fleet of Northstar forty-passenger planes without increasing seating capacity to air-coach standards. However, the Canadian airline plans to re-enter deluxe air competition to Europe when it receives delivery next year of several Super Constellations.

It would be foolish to venture any conclusions about international coach service until such service has been flown for at least a year. Perhaps even a single year may not be enough to warrant many final conclusions. But certainly a year's operations ought to give some indications as to whether there is a future for both types of service over the North Atlantic.

Those who favor the tourist-class service say that if the trial period to begin on May 1 proves that the service is not economic, then air travel will become a restricted and costly form of transportation and the limits of its growth will be clearly defined. They hope, and believe, that such is not the case.

HELICOPTER IMPROVEMENT

A military event that had implications of future benefit for commercial air travel went almost unnoticed last week when the Piasecki Helicopter Corporation of Morton, Pa., delivered to the U. S. Navy the first production-line helicopters with automatic pilots. The automatic pilot is expected to do much to make the helicopter an even more useful vehicle.