

Frequent flier sits down on the job

LOS ANGELES — Squeezing the supple leather atop an American Airlines business-class seat, Scott Donkin jiggles its adjustable headrest up.

"This is a neat feature," Donkin says with surprising enthusiasm considering the hour: It's close to midnight outside Gate 42 of Los Angeles International Airport. While a cleaning crew fusses over how the remodeled DC-10's interior looks, Donkin helps USA TODAY evaluate something more fundamental to the plane's passengers — the comfort of the seats.

Donkin is well-suited for the job. A frequent flier, the Lincoln, Neb., chiropractor is also an ergonomics consultant and author of the book *Sitting on the Job*. In short, he's an expert on comfortable sitting and no fan of uni-size airline seats. "If one size fits all, it doesn't really fit anybody," he says.

The seats he's examining are on one of the 10 DC-10 jets that American flies between Los Angeles and New York. The business- and first-class seats are new to domestic flights this month, although American has had them for two years on overseas routes. The coach seats, too, are new and cushier.

What's Donkin think? He gives a "B" to the business-class seats and a "C-" to the coach seats.

To understand why, you need a little background. In a perfect seat, your spine should form a soft curve. It should come forward at the base of your neck, backward slightly between your shoulder blades and forward again in your lower back. Your shoulders should have room to move backward and not be pressed forward by the seat. Most airline coach seats curve slightly forward toward the top, which flattens the natural curves of your spine and causes you to slump in a futile search for relief.

The secret of a comfortable seat is adaptability. The more you can do to make a seat fit, the more comfortable you'll be. By that standard, American's first-class seat rates a "B+," Donkin says. It reclines farther, and its leg rest raises higher than the business-class seat.

Most fliers will sit in business class or coach, though. Here's what Donkin says about those seats:

► Business class. "This seat has a tremendous capability to fit people correctly — as long as people know how to do it," he says.

His suggestion: American should teach passengers how to adjust their seats and use pillows and blankets to support their necks and backs.

Donkin likes the movable



By Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY
COMFY? Chiropractor and frequent flier Scott Donkin gives American Airlines business-class seat a 'B.'

headrest, a log-shaped cushion attached to the top of the seat, that wiggles up as much as 3 inches to accommodate tall fliers. Firm at the ends, soft in the middle, it's a good place to rest your head.

Unlike the coach seats, the business-class seats also have adjustable leg rests and footrests. They're wider and flatter across the back, too. Donkin likes all those features because they make the business-class seats more adaptable to different sizes of passengers. Fliers have more room to change position or use pillows and blankets to make the seat fit them.

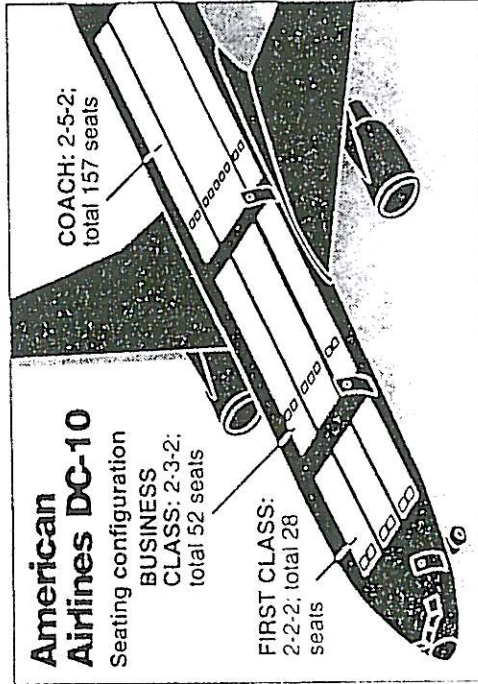
► Coach. "Compared to a lot of other aircraft seats I've sat

in, it's more comfortable," says Donkin.

That's faint praise, though. Donkin says that on the coach seat, like most airline coach seats, the backrest doesn't fit the natural contours of the body.

Though the seat has flared sides for lateral support, that won't help people who are too big or small for the seat, Donkin says. "Without any adjustability there, it's impossible it's like having a size-10 shoe fit everybody. People could fit into the seats, but they couldn't fit comfortably," he says.

Doug Carroll



Source: American Airlines

By Bob Law and USA TODAY