Internet Review

Saudi Arabian vs. United Airlines Websites

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Saudi Arabian Airlines Website

www.saudiairlines.com has come a long way. Not too long ago, the Saudi Arabian airlines website used to give only flight days and times for local and international flights. Even though that was very simple information, it was still very useful for planning purposes. I personally used the website to plan for all my trips, especially international flights. On many occasions, flights might be only on certain days of the week. If the trip involved a connecting flight, it was critical to know which days and times the flight would arrive to the destination to be able to find an appropriate connecting airline and flight.

Today, much has changed. One is able to check for actual seat availability on flights to local and international destinations. If seats are available, it is possible to make actual reservations online. This is a great development with regard to the online services provided by the Saudi Arabian airlines. Seat selections can also be made from available seats on the selected flight. Payment can be either made through credit card payment online or by paying at a Saudi Arabian airlines office. Not requiring immediate payment to confirm reservation is important in the Saudi culture for three reasons: 1. People are not used to making payments at the time of making reservations. 2. Only 9% of the country’s residents own credit cards as a form of payment (Al-Eqtisadiah, May 7, 2004). 3. Certain tickets are issued by governmental agencies and hence, payments need not be made for such tickets.
Once a reservation is completed, a reservation number is issued, and an email message is sent confirming reservation along with flight information. Purchasing of tickets or presenting governmental tickets has to be made prior to specified date. Failure to do so results in the cancellation of reservation. Another excellent feature of the website is the ability to keep records of all reservations made by each registered customer. This is important for a professional who has many travel plans.

One possible improvement for the site could be to send a reminder email message a few days prior to the deadline for reservations confirmation. Other improvements relate to the messages produced to the user, especially when a flight cannot be found. It is not clear if flights are not available on the specified date or if a flight is available, however, all seats are booked.

There are a few drawbacks to the functionality of the website that I hope can be resolved soon. Theses include the following:

- Checking and reservation of flights cannot be made if they are within 48 hours away. I see no reason why this cannot be reduced to a 24-hour period.

- Reservations can only be made if they initiate from a Saudi city. This is a major drawback for guests who wish to travel to the country from other parts of the World. I don’t see why the airlines cannot send a ticket via registered postage to an international customer if it was purchased early enough, or have the customer pick up the ticket at the airlines office on the day of the flight.

- Reservations can only be made as round-trip or one-way, no multi city reservations are possible.

- Sometimes, the deadline for reservations confirmation specifies a time of the day when the Saudi Arabian airlines
offices are closed, or just opening, for example 9 AM. I had this problem recently, I knew the deadline date, but, did not bother to remember the deadline hour of the day, when I looked at the reservations information the night before, and realized it was early in the morning, it was too late to confirm the booking, which leads to the next problem.

- Reservations made through the Internet cannot be confirmed at travel agencies. Their computer systems cannot access reservations made on the Saudi Arabian airlines website.

- Access to Al-Fursan account information is not possible yet. Redemption of Al-Fursan frequent flyer miles should be possible through the website. Actually, the regular process used is faulty itself. One must start the processing for receiving a free tickets at least 14 days prior to planned trip. The mile redemption process should be integrated directly into the reservations and ticketing systems.

United Airlines Website

United airlines is one of the largest airlines in the United States, it has had online service many years prior to the Saudi Arabian airlines. Its website at [www.ual.com](http://www.ual.com) provides all the services provided by the Saudi Arabian airlines website, except for the ability to make payment at a later time. For United airlines, making a booking online means you are willing to purchase the ticket at that instance. Typical ticket pricing methods for American airlines in general are different than pricing methods for Saudi tickets. For American flights, the earlier you purchase a ticket the less you are likely to pay for it. Ticket prices may suddenly change at any moment. Prices vary based on supply and demand. This makes it urgent that Internet reservations are only confirmed by immediate payment through credit card. If
customers are allowed to hold a reservation, even for a few short days, especially when only a few seats are available, it may lead to the loss of another potential customer who was willing to pay, to another airline.

United airlines website offers a lot more services than the Saudi Arabian airlines website. This is expected especially since it has been in service for many more years. These services include the same services offered by the Saudi airlines website in addition to the following:

- Frequent miles records and redemption for tickets.
- Ability to purchase electronic tickets, which can be picked up at the airport on the date of the flight.
- Ability to make reservations on associate and partner airlines.
- Ability to make other travel arrangements, such as hotel reservations, car, and cruise bookings.
- Ability to choose flights based on different factors: cost, number of stops, departure time, arrival time, number of miles for flight, and, on-time performance of flight.
- Receive 1000 frequent flyer miles for booking online.
- A calendar to determine days on which specific dates fall.

One visible drawback in the United airlines website is that it does not allow for inclusion of infant passengers for price calculation purposes or seats reservations. It seems like you have to resort to making a phone call to a United operative for this problem.
Additionally, United has removed a previously valuable service, which allowed the access to all airlines flight information, even of none partner airlines, and giving customers cost information for those other airlines, which may result in the customer actually purchasing a flight from a competitor. This seems to be a good reason for the removal of that service. Even though it is acceptable to me as a probably necessary business decision to remove that service, I still think highly about the airline for its previous willingness to provide total access to all relevant information to a customer’s request. It was a good reason for making me a loyal customer of United, especially when traveling within the United States.

I look forward to a day when the Saudi airlines website reaches a similar level of development and customer service as provided by the United airlines website. I think this day will be soon!