



### **Business Travel Association VS100 flight**

Tuesday, November 28th was no ordinary day. I was awake early in eager anticipation of the day ahead, to be truthful I had not slept well. It was a mixture of excitement and weird trepidation that had kept me awake, but now the sun was meekly making its daily pilgrimage from east to west, the day ahead was full of suspense.

I was quickly whisked away to Heathrow Terminal 3 and before I knew it, I was through security and heading towards the sanctuary of the wonderful and welcoming Virgin Atlantic clubhouse lounge.

Take off for VS 100 was now just a couple of hours away so enough time to enjoy an excellent full English and a glass of champagne in the lounge to toast the milestone that was about to happen. In the lounge, I caught up with BTA members Jason Geall of Amex GBT and Chris Galanty of Flight Centre. We talked with some excitement about the experience ahead and the long-term impact on aviation and business travel.

It was soon time to board and the chirpy Virgin team in the lounge bid us farewell and guided us to the Virgin Atlantic Boeing 787, loaded with 100% sustainable aviation fuel and ready to escort us to the Big Apple.

As we readied for departure, our Captain informed us that the flight would take a specially negotiated direct route to New York, taking a little over seven hours. We would fly for an hour and then he, alongside Virgin Maintenance and Rolls Royce would ensure all was well before we were cleared to begin our transatlantic crossing.

As we sat waiting for take-off, it dawned on me the importance of my fellow passengers, Secretary for States, MPs, CEOs, travel industry leaders, executives from Rolls Royce, journalists, Virgin Atlantic's CEO, Shai Weiss, and my aviation hero Sir Richard Branson who was sat just two rows in front of me. I felt truly in awe and privileged to have been invited to join this very special flight.

Then it was time. The comforting jolt alerted me that we had begun the pushback and take off was imminent. I reflected on the journey ahead of me. A test flight exclusively using 100% SAF for the first time. The mind wanders to question how robust the testing was, are they sure it will work?!

Then I heard that reassuring whirring as the first engine sprung into life quickly followed by the second and everything felt normal. There were no different sounds and no smells of old chip fat filling the cabin!

Then we were off and with engines roaring, we were pushed back in our seats as the power of the two Rolls Royce engines propelled us along the runaway. As we left the ground a spontaneous round of applause broke out throughout the cabin accompanied by more than a few cheers!

Groups of old and new acquaintances gathered around the bar and exits to chat. Film crews conducted interviews with the Virgin Management team and national journalists probed them with searching questions on the true sustainability credentials of aviation. As an aviation geek, I just sat back and observed the conversations.

Soon after, I welcomed the arrival of lunch and eagerly tucked into the chicken dish I had ordered the week before. Pre-ordering may seem like a small thing but it's another important step in reducing food waste on board.

After some quiet time, I and my fellow passengers were joined by the Captain who explained that the engines had to be drained and flushed to remove all traces of traditional aviation fuel before they could



fill the aircraft tanks with sustainable aviation fuel. This process will be repeated in reverse in New York to allow the aircraft to fly back with traditional fuel, a process that will take 24 hours. Although fascinating, it highlighted aviation's long road ahead to achieve net zero emissions.

After more inspiring conversation and afternoon tea, our Boeing 787 began its descent into New York's JFK airport, marking the final stage of this historic flight. The approach to JFK was choppy as it often is due to the winds around the airport but nothing out of the ordinary. It was a clear day, and the sun was out as the New York skyline drifted past the aircraft's oversized windows.

At 14:05 local time, the tyres of flight VS 100 kissed the tarmac and the aircraft erupted into applause to celebrate the first flight powered by 100% sustainable aviation fuel. A key milestone in aviation's strive for decarbonisation has been accomplished.

On the taxi to the stand, Richard Branson congratulated all involved and we headed to the Virgin Hotel New York to attend a party in celebration of this achievement.

I must thank the Virgin team for inviting me, I am truly honoured to have been part of a defining moment of aviation history. Many congratulations once more on an outstanding and critically important advancement for our sector.

*Clive Wratten, CEO of the Business Travel Association*