

SINGAPORE AIRLINES AIRBUS A380 – A PERSONAL VIEW

by Chris McDonald.

I obtained a seat on the inaugural return flight Sydney-Singapore of the new double-decker Airbus A380 on 26 October 2007, and a very fine experience it was too! The flight was a charity event for Medicins Sans Frontiers.

My three-day experience began with a QANTAS B747 flight from Perth to Sydney. This proved to be fortuitous as it enabled me to fix in my mind the relative sizes of these two very large aircraft. After over-nighting in Sydney, my adrenalin levels began to rise.

Arriving at the Sydney International Terminal at around 10 a.m. on the Friday morning, the A380 was being pulled up to the gate with hundreds of people cramming the terminal windows to get a glimpse of her.

Well, quite frankly, she did not look very much larger than a B747, though there are some clear indications that she is a little longer, has larger engines and the most obvious difference is the size of the wings, huge moon-crescent shaped things that blocked out most of the sunlight! Really beautiful.

The day got off to a great start as my fellow-travelers, some 450 of them from all around the world, gathered to the sounds of a jazz band. After check-in, we proceeded to a specially closed-off area near to the departure gate for an official reception, speeches and much quaffing of a delightful French Champagne, before our anticipated boarding for 4 p.m. Regretfully, a storm front enveloped the airfield which caused a two-hour delay; fine, more Champagne!

We eventually boarded close to 6 pm to begin marveling at the design and spaciousness of this big bird. I had a seat in economy class but this was to change as I shall shortly relate. In economy, there are newly-designed seats which are a lot wider and recline forward as well as aft, so the intrusion into the person behind is now significantly minimized. All controls for the entertainment system (more than 1000 choices!) are now contained in the seat back in front of you with an 11 inch widescreen TV, which also can be used for PC work. There are also glass holders and a coat hook, a welcome addition. The seats are also quite comfortable (will become softer with age as these were very new) and will easily get you off to sleep on that next flight to London or wherever with the help of a large folding footrest. All-in-all for an economy seat they are very good but not the quantum leap into the 21st century that I had expected.

Not so, though, in Business and First Class (sorry 'First Suites' as SIA calls them as they are several notches above other First Class seats, if you have ever flown there). Firstly, 60 Business Class seats are located upstairs (there are two sets of stairs including the spiral one at the rear of economy to access more economy seats up there) and they are very wide and plush hand-stitched Italian leather, with a much larger wide-screen TV; this for me is the place to sit! First Suites sit in a world of their own forward in the lower cabin. Sumptuous is hardly a fitting description; double hand-stitched Italian leather seats either side of each 'cabin', which is an appropriate description of these suites, think Orient Express, each of which can be closed off and blinds pulled down for complete privacy as your saronged personal stewardess prepares your bed for the night. Far too ostentatious for me, or for that matter anyone I know!

However, I had the good fortune to hitch a ride with a fellow passenger who had bid for, and obtained, a First Suites seat and, after around 2 hours in my economy seat with dinner, was invited for drinks 'up front'. So there I remained for 6 of the 8-hour flight, downing some delectable delicacies personally prepared by two on-board chefs, including Matt Moran from Sydney's Aria Restaurant, washed down with Fichon Langueville Burgundy 1982 and Grange

Hermitage 1999.

I did not feel the landing in Singapore!! Which could also be said for the take-off in Sydney. This plane is exceptionally quiet and unbelievably stable in the air.

As each cabin segment is independent, it means that you are generally in an area of around 75-80 people and it feels like being in a smaller plane, but much quieter and comfortable. All-in-all, the A380 is a fine aircraft, and, with the addition of the Rolls Royce Trent 900 engines, and their giant 116 inch fans, is about to make flying long-distance a much more pleasurable experience.

SIA will put its second A380 on the Singapore-London run from around June next year. But don't expect to see it in Perth. This aircraft is a *Hubber*, that is to say it will carry large numbers of people from one Hub to another, think Sydney-Vancouver, Singapore-London, New York-Frankfurt, etc.

The real hub-buster will be the all-new Boeing B787 Dreamliner, due to make its debut next year and will be seen in Perth when QANTAS off-shoot Jetstar gets the first models around early-2009. Oh!! That I could be on that!!

Chris McDonald