

THE LAST WORD

As we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the inauguration of supersonic passenger services, Jennifer Coutts Clay looks back at Concorde.

Concorde clients still rhapsodise over their memories of the amazing “Time Machine”, which “arrived before it had taken off”. The flight to New York from London or Paris took about three and a half hours, so with a five- or six-hour time difference, Concorde passengers flying west touched down in the US before they started their journey – in local time.

Imagine the excitement of travelling at twice the height of Mount Everest, near the edge of space, at twice the speed of sound and faster than a rifle bullet! And the push in the back as Concorde accelerated beyond Mach 1! Due to Concorde’s cruise altitude, passengers experienced only one sixth of the turbulence associated with subsonic flying.

THE ALLURE OF CONCORDE

Concorde passenger service standards were legendary, and this was the most prized market segment in the world of transportation. Newcomers wondered how they would feel inside the supersonic “needle-nose”, but regulars said the flight resembled a visit to a millionaire-class restaurant or yacht for an exquisite meal designed by superstar chefs, accompanied by the finest vintage wines and champagne.

Tickets generally cost about 20% more than the comparable first-class fare, a bargain for ‘time-is-money’ tycoons. Concorde passenger manifests invariably included the ultra-rich and famous: TV, movie and music-business icons, royalty, state officials and politicians. Naturally, cabin crew bid ferociously for

Concorde assignments, even though the 16-inch-wide aisle and cramped galley conditions on board the aircraft posed inherent operating challenges.

Concorde’s window panes measured just six and a half inches by four and a half inches, but window seats were greatly coveted because of the unforgettable views of the curvature of the planet and the indigo colour of the surrounding sky.

At British Airways, I was privileged to hold the position of controller corporate identity, and I worked on the “Landor” Concorde scheme, the flagship of the airline’s privatisation programme launched in 1985. Because British Airways was transitioning from government to investor ownership, the decision was taken to display the airline’s heraldic coat of arms on Concorde’s vertical tail-fin, replacing part of the quartered Union Jack of the previous livery.

SUPERSONIC SHADES OF GREY

Inside the cabin, we installed a luxurious leather upholstery scheme based on Balmoral grey from Andrew Muirhead Leather, Glasgow. Hailed as the epitome of refined business executive styling, the Concorde design treatment was subsequently emulated by airlines worldwide.

The commercial development of Concorde was headed by Gerry Draper, BA’s marketing director. “Many passengers were disappointed with the space provided, compared with a Boeing 747,” he explained. “We therefore claimed that the experience was similar to an



Jennifer Coutts Clay is an aviation consultant and the author of *Jetliner Cabins*. First published in 2003, the third edition of the book, *Jetliner Cabins: Evolution & Innovation*, is now available as an app. Jennifer has used her 35-plus year career in the industry – including senior positions at British Airways and Pan American – to collate over 130,000 words and more than 4,000 pictures across a wide range of cabin interior aspects, including product branding and passenger experience. App videos can be viewed on www.jetlinercabins.com.

E-Type Jaguar, compared with a Rolls-Royce. We used to feature the cabin environment as ‘like a spring morning’ because Concorde was the only airliner with a strong fuselage. Hence you did not suffer from the oxygen starvation that builds up on subsonic flights and makes a major contribution to jet lag.”

Could Concorde’s clientele ever have imagined the standards of luxury available today in the widebody cabins of the ‘gold-standard’ airlines? Opulent double-bedroom suites with separate living room and bathroom facilities; individual sleeper pods with fully flat beds and personal butlers; shower spas, child-minder areas, massage seat cushions, writing desks, vanity units and pre-ordered gourmet meals; larger windows, increased storage space and mood lighting; improved air quality and sound insulation; widescreen TV with thousands of on-demand entertainment options, including catalogue shopping, computer gaming, social networking, Wi-Fi and inflight connectivity ... what a list! ■

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