

Forget Nostalgia: Air Travel Was Not Better in the So-called 'Golden Age'



Getty Images

In many ways, for many more people, flying is better today. But the legend persists.

MARISA GARCIA NOVEMBER 06, 2016

Every so often, travelers express a yearning to return to “the good old days” of flying: a lost era when airlines like Braniff International Airways, Eastern Air Lines, and Pan American World Airways ruled the skies, flight attendants' buffon hairdos were tucked under astronaut-inspired hats, everyone wore their Sunday best, and your in-flight was meat carved seat-side on a tray.

While industry experts acknowledge that flying today is different, they say the change is largely for the better.

“Premium cabins are light years ahead of what Pan Am had to offer, and at some extent so are Economy cabins,” British Airways' cabin design expert Cristian Sutter told *Travel + Leisure*.

“Modern Economy Class seats are ergonomically designed with adjustable headrests, seat cushions can prevent deep-vein thrombosis, [there are] power outlets to charge your devices, built-in HD and Hi-Fi in-flight entertainment systems with touch screens, video-on-demand, and audio-on-demand,” Sutter said. “We even have Wi-Fi connectivity to keep you up and running for work and entertainment.”

The best entertainment Pan Am could offer was a projector screen and a set program of films scheduled to play during the flight. Headsets of old were little more than plastic tubes with poor audio quality. The plane was also louder, so hearing the movie could be difficult.

“When it comes to the aircraft—and regardless of the class you are traveling—modern airliners offer quieter cabins with higher air pressure and bigger windows,” Sutter said. “[There’s] LED mood lighting to set the cabin ambiance. It helps passengers relax, and can reduce the effects of jet lag.”

Another big plus of flying today: No smoking allowed. Those quintessential, 1970s hues (orange, terra cotta, and brown) were picked by airlines like Braniff because they disguised all sorts of stains. Including nicotine.

“Non-smoking cabins with bleedless air systems and HEPA filters make cabin air almost as clean as the air found in operating theaters,” Sutter said.

Creating the “Golden Age” Legend

More than a generation after its last flight, the legend of Pan Am endures. Despite the improvements Sutter highlights, some fliers are convinced Pan Am was better—even those who were not around to fly on the airline.

We asked Jennifer Coutts-Clay, who was the general manager of product design and development for Pan Am (and responsible for the iconic Pan Am Blue design program) to explain the enduring allure she in part helped to create. As an industry consultant, Coutts-Clay has seen plenty of aircraft cabins. She is also the author of *JetlinerCabins*, the app-based guide to aircraft interiors, and an image-based historical record that balances nostalgia with behind-the-scenes insights.

Coutts-Clay told T+L the popularity of Pan Am was in large part due to the airline’s commitment to offer “the best.” While Pan Am lacked the technology of today’s cabins, it was on the cutting edge for its time. She also said Pan Am built strong customer loyalty with its Business Clipper Class.

As Coutts-Clay explained, everything about Clipper Class was designed to make frequent flying business travelers feel special. Curiously, one of the most attractive features of the Clipper Club was its membership fees, which started around \$1,000 a year in the 1980s. (That would be about \$3,000 a year today.)

The idea of complicated frequent flier rewards and precious metal tiers (think: AAdvantage Executive Platinum) hadn’t been dreamed up by Bob Crandall at American Airlines yet. The Clipper Club strategy was different, and more akin to being accepted at a country club.

“In addition to an annual, renewable membership, there were more long-term schemes, and even a life membership program. There were regular Clipper Magazine newsletters with promotional offers for hotel accommodation, sporting events, cultural activities, and more,” Coutts-Clay said.

Today’s frequent fliers might revolt if an airline suggested this “Golden Age” feature, but Clipper Club members enjoyed extremely personalized service. It made paying the fee worthwhile. During a time when travel was far more complicated and alienating, Pan Am made sure customers always felt at home.

“In the early days of global business travel—and before computers, or portable telephones—Clipper Class passengers had a worldwide support network via the airline,” she said. “This provided a unique security context, not only for business travelers but also for their family members, colleagues, and friends.” Clipper Club customers were also more involved with the airline. There were invite-only social occasions for members during the launch of new routes, new lounges, or new ticket offices. They were invited to join airline consultative committees where they met with heads of marketing to give feedback on products.

But many airlines and industry designers continue to this day to enlist top-tier frequent fliers to share their views on products during the development process. The difference with the Pan Am Clipper Club was its very tony status. If you could afford to fly Clipper Class, and pay for that membership, then you must “be somebody.”

Being the Best in Class

Of course, the airline’s cabins were also the most attractive and comfortable on the market. There were no lie-flat seats or private suites on Pan Am planes, but those VIP’s seated in the Pan Am Blue Clipper Class smiled all the way around the world and back, seated in the airplane-equivalent of a BarcaLounger.

“Cabin seating [configuration] was 2-2-2, with wide aisles. Passengers were not cramped together,” Coutts-Clay said.

That wouldn’t pass muster by today’s Business Class standards, with all passengers expecting direct-aisle access and convertible lie-flat beds. But the Pan Am marketing and design team worked hard to keep the cabin product and brand identity exclusive—even down to the specific shade of blue used in livery and brand materials.

There were also Clipper Class goodies, like distinctive identity bag-tags, menu cards, and amenity kits. All of these are still offered today, but Pan Am’s amenities were durable keepsakes. Higher fares before deregulation meant airlines could spend more on these items.

Keeping the Legend Alive

Pan Am also has something today’s airlines lack: brand curators to keep the legend alive. Those individuals who helped develop the brand’s mystique, like Coutts-Clay, are part of an even more private club dedicated to preserving the airline’s legacy.

“The Pan Am brand is still recognized and marketed widely,” Coutts-Clay said. “For example, at John F. Kennedy International Airport, there are flight bags and accessories showing the iconic Blue Ball logo. In Berlin, there is a Pan Am Lounge. In Miami, there is a Pan Am restaurant.”

There are also upcoming events, like a commemoration next February and a meeting in Berlin in May of 1,000 former Pan Am employees and enthusiasts.

Coutts-Clay will join her colleagues and fellow-Pan Am fans at these events, and it is the work of these brand fans that can in large part be credited for the ongoing romance we have with Pan Am.

In a time when it was unheard of for women to have leadership positions at airlines, Coutts-Clay became a legend herself by balancing grace with a formidable character and determination. She was also responsible for the British Airways Concorde project, and remains active in the community that curates the Concorde legend.

Still, Coutts-Clay is the first to say that many of today's products are better—if only because they are now possible—and that airline passengers today enjoy more while paying less.

The most important lesson of the enduring Pan American World Airways brand is that sometimes paying less is a disadvantage. Lasting loyalty can't be bought with frequent flier miles, but exclusivity goes a long, long way.