



'GAME-CHANGING' B747SP

In April 1976, Pan Am launched the Boeing 747SP, a variant of the B747-100. SP stands for 'Special Performance', but what was so special about the SP?

In 1976, with a view to building on the marketing success of its B747-100 fleet, Pan American World Airways (Pan Am) wanted an aircraft that could provide non-stop service on ultra-long-haul routes such as New York to Tokyo, New York to Tehran or Los Angeles to Sydney. These city pairs generated solid business class revenues, but the distances were too great to fly non-stop. Pan Am did not want to wait for engine manufacturers to develop higher-thrust engines, so the proposed solution to the problem was to shorten the B747, which would reduce aircraft weight and thus increase its flying range.

At Boeing, the design was nicknamed the 747SB, the SB standing for 'short body' or 'Sutter's ballooney', the latter referring to Joe Sutter, chief engineer of the manufacturing programme, who is often referred to as the 'father of the B747'. The SP variant was about 47ft (14m) shorter than the standard B747 (the E-zone was removed), with the truncated shape described as being similar to that of an American football. Name-calling aside, from the time of its service entry, the SP set world aeronautical records: it could fly further, faster and higher than any other subsonic aircraft.

Pan Am's SP cabin-configuration at the time of delivery was 44 standard first-class seats, 222 economy-class seats, and 14 first-class dining positions in the upper deck lounge. But there was a need to develop new ways to ensure the comfort and well-being of premium-class passengers on flights lasting 12 to 15 hours.

In the piston era, Pan Am had offered 'Sleeperette' seats on flights with comparable flying times (of course, over shorter distances). For the SP the airline decided to develop a dramatically new first-class sleeper-seat cabin, incorporating extendable bi-fold footrests plus 60° of seatback recline. The upper deck was retrofitted to accommodate 16 Sleeperette seats (making up for seats lost on the main deck due to the increased



pitch of the new seat-row layout). Immediately successful on the SP fleet, this luxurious cabin upgrade was subsequently implemented across Pan Am's entire B747-100 fleet.

All airlines aspiring to compete in the first-class market then had to rethink their cabin treatments, product features and customer benefits.

With only 10 SPs in the Pan Am fleet, the next stage was to rapidly develop Clipper Class, the first fully dedicated and branded airline business class cabin. The special C-class fare (later changed

to J-class) related to C-zone, where there were initially 56 seats configured eight-abreast, with enhanced armrests and tray-tables. Meals were served using real china and glassware, and alcohol was complimentary. Subsequently, Pan Am changed the Clipper Class layout to six-abreast, once again challenging all competing airlines.

The Pan Am SP LOPA for B-zone shows a flight attendant rest compartment containing four bunks. Ann Blumensaadt, a former Pan Am flight attendant based at New York's JFK airport, who worked the

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intercontinental flights to destinations such as Tokyo and Dharan, explains, "The B747SP was the only Pan Am plane that had bunk rooms. When the SP was launched there were standard rest-seats for flight attendants at the back of the aircraft. But after about a year of operations, the company and the flight-attendant union negotiated a designated compartment containing four bunks, located behind the last row of first-class seats in B zone. It made a world of difference to be able to sleep for two hours and then wake up refreshed, ready to go back to work."

Linda Freire, co-chair of the Pan Am Museum Foundation, also a former Pan Am flight attendant, recalls crew rest arrangements on other B747 variants, "Break-time was mandatory and, usually, we had reserved first class or Clipper business-class seats. But the crew rest was never easy, private or really restful. Since we were in full view of the passengers in the cabin, it was the norm to find someone tapping on our shoulders to ask for something. The bunk compartment on the B747SP eliminated these interruptions and kept the revenue seats for paying passengers."

The B-zone LOPA also shows a longitudinal galley, which contained refrigerated compartments and capacious storage areas. As Blumensaadt recalls, "This galley was shared by first class and Clipper class. It's the only galley I ever worked on that had windows: about half-a-dozen of them. I loved that! Pan Am had its own catering department in those days and the meals we served were wonderful."

In the economy class cabin the galley was located at the rear of the aircraft. As Freire says, "This installation provided ample space and ease of accessibility for crew members. And there was a galley at the rear of the upper deck, with a cart lift connecting to the main deck. First-class passengers really enjoyed being on the upper deck, and they found they could sleep more easily than on the main deck. Tokyo flights were well-known for the star names and fashion industry celebrities that were onboard. Passengers to Dharan were most often oil men, flying from Texas to Saudi Arabia to work on the rigs: they were very affluent and thought nothing of flashing wads of US\$100 bills and showing off the many large gold rings they wore. On the main deck there was plenty of space for passengers to take a stroll

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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during the flight. More than just a technologically great aircraft, the SP was a dream for flight crews to work!"

How many first- and business-class airline passengers today realise that they are the inheritors of the splendid standards pioneered by this game-changing aircraft? Across the world of intercontinental air travel the B747SP certainly proved it could provide a very special performance. ✪

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