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DUBAI

A LAVISH CITY OF REINVENTION p. 52

PLUS

AIRCRAFT FLEETS:
WHAT'S NEXT FOR
PASSENGER COMFORT? p. 40

UPDATE: TSA PRECHECK
AND GLOBAL ENTRY p. 44

MADRID MASTERS
THE ART OF DOING
BUSINESS p. 60

TOURISM TRIUMPHS
IN **NORTHERN**
IRELAND p. 66

GLAM HOT SPOTS
IN **THE CÔTE D'AZUR**
DAZZLE p. 74



SMOOTH FLYING: SWISS' Boeing 777 (top), and ANA's Boeing 787 Dreamliner (bottom)
PHOTOS: © SWISS, © ANA

Fleets of Fancy

With investment in new aircraft, airlines fly toward a robust future. BY DEBRA BOKUR

Remember that old cartoon *The Jetsons*? Low-level executive George Jetson lived in a futuristic world of vivid primary colors and airborne traffic that zipped between the suburbs and office complexes via skyways. Fun times, provided you could find a docking spot at the spaceport in time for your meeting.

Ascension, by definition, is part of the flight experience — and while we may not enjoy the convenience and comfort of personal flying ships to get us where we need to go (at least not yet), commercial carriers have engaged in a steady climb toward providing ever-loftier passenger experiences. Innovative design, upgraded equipment, cabin refurbishments and elevated dining selections combine the best modern technology has to offer with brilliant service perks.

Massive investments in the future of air passenger travel begin with fleet modernization. “The new [Airbus] A350 aircraft have proved to be very good,” offers Pekka Vauramo, CEO, Finnair. “And the entire Finnair organization has worked hard with the new aircraft to ensure a unique Nordic experience. Our new wide-body aircraft are the engine of our growth, and they support the strategic growth of our traffic, particularly in Asia,

from this year onwards. The growth of our long-haul capacity will also create a need for increased feeder traffic capacity between Helsinki and our European destinations."

Finnair plans to double its Asian traffic by 2020 from the 2010 baseline, and the A350 fleet investment provides the backbone of this strategy. Finnair ordered a total of 19 A350s, making it the biggest investment in Finnair's history. The first three are already operating in the fleet, with another scheduled for delivery by the end of 2016. The complete order will be fulfilled by 2023.

In business-class cabins aboard Swiss International Air Lines, increased privacy, new ambient lights and ample stowage space are all part of the new flagship Boeing 777-300ER flight experience. Along with the latest seat cushion technology and 11-inch touchscreens, passengers can enjoy a new kiosk-bar facility in economy cabins — and all cabins will benefit from new LED lighting systems and broadband Internet service.

"Our new Boeing 777-300ER is the consequent evolution of our already high cabin standard," says Paul Estoppey, head of cabin interior development and infotainment, SWISS. "The bespoke first class comes with a completely flexible suite, which allows an open seating (for boarding or dining), as well as a completely closed suite for sleeping — or just peace of mind. These private suites include a 32-inch screen, the largest in the industry."

SWISS parent company Lufthansa received its first Airbus A320neo in late January, with four additional craft scheduled for later this year. With new PW1100G engine technology and superior aerodynamics, this model boasts 15 percent better fuel efficiency than comparable models, along with reduced emissions and noise output. Additionally, the carrier completed a massive refurbishment of cabin spaces across the fleet, incorporating all aircraft in service: 106 long-haul planes boast the latest cabins and new seats in business and economy, along with sparkling-fresh first-class cabins. New screens with enhanced audio and video content are part of the updated in-flight entertainment systems, while FlyNet broadband Internet access via onboard WLAN WiFi is now available.

Meanwhile, the award-winning Airbus A380 service offered by Etihad Airways features the only commercially available three-room aircraft suite: The Residence by Etihad. The airline's über-modern fleet includes state-of-the-art in-flight entertainment systems aboard a wide range of craft — along with exceptional dining and customer experiences.

Saudi Arabian Airlines will increase U.S. flights in June 2016, offering services to Los Angeles five times weekly. The carrier, which also serves New York, Washington, D.C. and Toronto in North America, currently offers three weekly flights to LAX, inaugurated in March 2014. The airline recently took delivery of one new Boeing 777-300ER and three Boeing 787-900 Dreamliners, part of its fleet modernization program with plans to expand the total aircraft to around 200 by the year 2020.

Back in the heady, novel passenger flight days of 1954, Scandinavian Airlines was the first carrier to offer scheduled flights along a polar route, making the flight from Copenhagen to Los Angeles with fuel stops in Greenland and Canada with a Douglas DC-6B. The carrier added a second route in 1957 with a Douglas DC-7C that made the transit from Copenhagen to Tokyo with a stop in Alaska — necessary due to Soviet Union air



COMFORT CLASS: SAS' business class (top), Saudi Arabian Airlines (middle) and the bedroom of The Residence by Etihad Airways (bottom)

PHOTOS: © SAS, © SAUDI ARABIAN AIRLINES, © ETHAD



LOFTY LAUNCH: British Airways' Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner first class (top), and Iberia's business class (bottom)

PHOTOS © BRITISH AIRWAYS, © IBERIA

aircraft, including final delivery of the last of a dozen new A380 jumbo craft this year. Current upgrades include refreshing 18 existing Boeing 747s which will operate on selected flights, with further routes added in the summer of this year. This month BA introduces the A380 on the Vancouver to London route, while the Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner — offering the airline's latest first-class cabin — will launch with service from San José to London.

Dizzy yet? Take your seat and fasten your belt, because there's even more going on at cruising altitude. American Airlines, which began flying the Boeing 787-800 Dreamliner in May 2015, adds the Boeing 787-900 model later this year. The new planes will include the introduction of premium economy on international routes. American will also be the first U.S. airline to introduce the Airbus A350 next year.

"We are still taking new [Boeing] 777-300ERs this year, which include a three-class cabin with international first class," notes Joshua Freed, senior manager, corporate communications, American Airlines, explaining American retrofitted many of the fleet's existing Boeing 767s and 777-200s. The airline is investing more than \$2 billion in fully lie-flat seats, international WiFi,



more in-flight entertainment options and power outlets; a new, modern design for Admirals Club lounges worldwide; and an upgraded assortment of complimentary healthy foods, cocktails and more.

"This," continues Freed, "is in addition to American's historic fleet renewal which has delivered 215 new aircraft since 2014. More than 90 new planes are expected in 2016."

Across the industry, equipment and service offerings are reaching new heights in terms of modernity and technological capabilities. Who knows? If George Jetson were around (or real), perhaps the routes, speed and perks of today's airlines would tempt even him to fly commercial.

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