

First class phase-out picks up steam

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Japan Airlines' spacious leather and wood trimmed first class sanctuary (Photo: JAL)

Whenever we see news about international first class cabins these days, it's usually that they are being discontinued. This trend has been going on for at least 20 years, and it shows no signs of slowing down – which makes us wonder: Does international first class have a future?

In recent news:

Cathay Pacific has just decided it will not put a first class cabin into its new Airbus A350-900s or the larger A350-1000s it has on order, instead configuring them with business class, premium economy and regular economy seating. News reports cite Cathay executives as saying the airline will still offer first class, but that the market for it is becoming a "niche segment" that will only allow it to work on key international business routes. Qatar Airways new A350s have no first class. Singapore Airlines's new A350, which debuted in March, has none, either. Nor does the new Finnair A350.

Lufthansa, which has long been a defender of first class for international routes out of its Frankfurt hub, doesn't feel the same way about its Munich hub. This coming winter, it plans to eliminate it on many intercontinental A330-300 flights out of Munich, including service to Charlotte, Montreal, Boston, Chicago, New York JFK and Washington Dulles.



That big QANTAS 747-400 that Chris flew to Australia in March was all business class- even on row one in the nose of the plane pictured here (Photo: Chris McGinnis)

Air India earlier this year decided to get rid of the first class cabin on the three 777-200LRs that it uses for its new Delhi-San Francisco route. Airline officials told the India Times that the occupancy rate for seats in the front cabin was only reaching about 25 percent.

Late last year, Emirates created the world's largest passenger airliner – an Airbus A380 with 615 seats – by eliminating first class and reconfiguring the plane with 58 business class and 557 economy seats. Other A380s in Emirates' large fleet have 489 or 517 seats in three classes.

Delta got rid of international first class a long time ago, and we reported a few months ago that United is gradually following suit, ordering new 787-8s, 787-9s and A350s that have no first class cabins. It also plans to end first class on its existing three-class 767-300s, although it will continue on some 777s and 747s for now. American still has a few first class seats flying around, but will they be pushed out of the sky with it rolls out a new international premium economy seat later this year?



Korean Air's first class cabin was empty on a recent Seoul-Atlanta flight (Photo: Chris McGinnis)

An analysis a few months ago by Airways News cited a few big reasons why first is falling out of favor with global business travelers. There is the usual concern of corporate bean-counters that travelers shouldn't be allowed too much luxury, making budgets for the big seats tighter or non-existent. But there's also the fact that international business class has improved on many airlines to the point where buying a first class seat instead of business class would just be gilding the lily (e.g. seats that recline to a fully flat

class seat instead of business class would just be gilding the lily (e.g. seats that recline to a fully flat position and offer aisle access for everyone are becoming standard for international business class, whereas in previous decades you could only find them in first.)

And finally the analysis noted that C-suite business travelers who used to routinely fly in first around the world now have another option: private jets. New kinds of purchase plans are making the cost of private jet travel more affordable, and new technology is producing larger business jets that have a much greater range. Major private jet operators like NetJets are concentrating their new plane orders on these intercontinental business jets to meet a growing global demand.

The analysis noted that the "vast majority" of passenger demand for first class airline travel has retreated to routes linking just 15 global business centers, including London, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dubai, Tokyo, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Seoul, Frankfurt, Paris, Zurich, Beijing and Sydney.

Would it matter to you if first class disappeared completely? Why or why not? Please leave your comments below.

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