

# With Airways and SIA aboard the A380 Inaugural

by Chris Sloan



On the evening of October 26, 1958, amidst a backdrop of glamor and anticipation, a Pan American Boeing 707 departed from New York's Idlewild Airport bound for Paris-Le Bourget (*Airways*, December 2007). Although a BOAC de Havilland Comet 4 had preceded that inaugural 'Clipper' flight by a few weeks, it was the 707 that truly ushered in the jet age. My grandparents were on that Pan Am flight. Then a young airline aficionado, I would listen spellbound as my grandfather regaled me with the story of that history-making trip.

When I first heard about the eBay auction of seats on the world's first scheduled flight of the Airbus A380 by Singapore Airlines (SIA), I knew this was my opportunity to participate in my own piece of history. Though it was an incredibly difficult time to take a week off from my business, travel to the other side of the world from my home in Miami Beach, Florida, and, most importantly, leave my 7-month-old son, my supportive wife Carla urged me to realize this dream. So with not a little trepidation I embarked on the tortuous process of bidding for tickets. Because of the nature of the event and the fact that all money raised would go to charity, this was no ordinary eBay auction. Bidders had to place a \$1,000 deposit and provide proof of a valid passport. Seats would be released in arbitrary blocks over a couple of weeks to



PHOTOS: CHRIS SLOAN

maintain interest. In order to guarantee a window seat in economy you were required to purchase a pair of tickets, so I had to find a travel companion. Finally, \$2,700 later, my friend Oscar Garcia (a former 747 pilot) and I had bought our way into the airline history books.

SIA—a company to which the word 'superb' simply doesn't do justice—then went to great lengths to fly hundreds of people, including Oscar and me, from all over the world to Singapore at massively reduced prices. Ramona Donan in SIA's Los Angeles office was a heroine to me and many other US travellers. I had a very narrow

'window' in which to travel, and wanted my pre-inaugural flight to be aboard the acknowledged 'Queen of the Skies' in its waning days—a Boeing 747-400—which seemed poetic... Yes, I am an airline geek.

At 0200 on October 25, I was 'sleepless in Singapore', not because of jetlag, but because in six hours' time I would be taking part in literally the biggest air transport milestone in nearly four decades, one unlikely to be eclipsed for many years. A multitude of emotions and thoughts flashed through my mind. I had a strong connection to the Airbus A380 because when I ran production at the TLC (The Learning Channel) cable TV network, I had overseen the creation of a documentary

about the aircraft, hosted by John Travolta. I had visited the Toulouse factory as the first airplane was being completed. With all its production problems, commercial viability questions, controversies, fallout, and delays, I always rooted for the A380. Now I was happy that, for one day at least, the headlines would be celebratory, not derogatory.

I had been envious of passengers on other first flights, but especially the one that occurred on January 21, 1970—the inaugural of the Boeing 747, also by Pan Am. For me, that day had arrived. I nurtured high

expectations of one of the most thrilling moments of my life, but what made it so special would be completely unexpected, more personally profound, and revealed long after the gigantic Airbus had returned to terra firma on its first scheduled arrival into Sydney, Australia.

At 0500 we stepped into a terminal at Singapore's Changi Airport that was nearly empty save for one streamer-adorned ticketing zone buzzing—and I do mean *buzzing*—with excitement. SIA had not missed an opportunity to make the event special, even at check-in. There was a paparazzi backdrop and red carpet where your picture was taken for your own custom stamp. Cameras rolled and flashbulbs popped as representatives of the international press added to the feeling that this was as big as a Hollywood premiere.

Making our way to Gate F31 at 0600, we reached the boarding lounge that had been converted into a standing room only party/champagne buffet/press conference replete with a chamber music quartet. At the boarding gate, two of the famed 'Singapore Girls' standing in front of a yellow ribbon held sway over the crowd. At sunrise, the guests saw the real star of the show—A380-841 9V-SKA (MSN 13)—as it emerged from its cloak of darkness, tended to by a veritable army of ground crew.

Around 0630, the flight crew showed up. You would have been excused if you thought U2's Bono or Oprah had arrived. They were mobbed like rock stars, and seemed genuinely surprised by the adulation. Among the crew was a largely unnoticed pilot in a different uniform—Captain Jacques Rosay, Airbus chief pilot for the A380 program and first to fly the airplane. Thirty minutes later, a beaming Chew Choon Seng, SIA's CEO, took the stage to present a check for \$1.3 million to three worthy charities: The Singapore Children's Hospitals; The Singapore Community Chest; and Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders). With his first new Airbus delivered only ten days earlier, if Seng was at all concerned he didn't show it as he cut a yellow ribbon declaring the flight open.

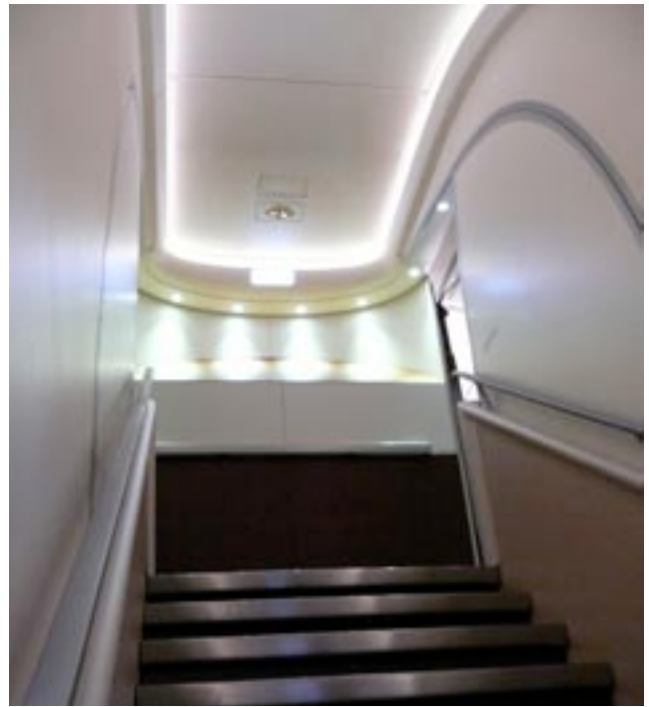
Boarding of Flight SQ380, bound for Sydney, began promptly at 0715, as Julian Hayward, the Briton who had paid \$100,300 for two tickets in the 'Suites', was invited to be first to board. There was thunderous applause. 'New Business' and economy class passengers were next to board through the three-airbridge gate, with two 'fingers' docked to the lower deck and one to the upper. The procedure was amazingly fast and smooth, silencing many critics.

Our bridge led to the upper deck. With people running around snapping pictures (myself included) and touring the airplane, I asked myself how this flight could possibly depart on time, and anticipated agitated crewmembers making panicked announcements requesting everyone to take their seats to prevent an embarrassing late departure. My travel companion and I were seated in 77K and 77H



PHOTOS: CHRIS SLOAN

*The flight crew arrives, followed by passenger boarding. A regular A380 flight will be crewed by 23 Singapore Girls (as SIA's iconic sarong kebaya-clad cabin attendants are endearingly called) and their male counterparts. An ebullient Chew Choon Seng, SIA's CEO, was on hand for the occasion.*



KOK CHWEE SIM

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*Impressions of the A380 (clockwise from top left): stairway to the upper deck; galley; digital faucet; travelling companion Oscar Garcia studies a KrisWorld promotional piece; flightdeck of 9V-SKA.*

in the intimate economy cabin upstairs. Miraculously and calmly, with not a stern word from the crew, everything settled down, and precisely at 0800 we pushed back. We noticed ground crewmembers on the ramp stopping to gawk at the new Queen of the Skies. There were also throngs of spectators in the terminal. I reflected that this is what it must have felt like to be a participant on those other great 'inaugurals': the Pan American Martin 130 *China Clipper* flying boat (in 1935), Boeing 707, and 747.

Our eerily quiet takeoff roll took all of 40 to 45 seconds. We later learnt that the Rolls-Royce Trent 970 turbofans had been operating at only 76% thrust. With very little cargo and a modest fuel load, the A380 was primed to leap into the sky. At 0815 and 154kt, the behemoth rotated to wild applause, whoops, and cheers. Chills went down my spine as the reveille lasted over a minute. Climbing gracefully over Singapore, we indeed were 'kings of the world'. The vast wing, designed for an even larger A380, put on a dazzling show with its triple-slotted ailerons vectoring us out over the South China Sea, onward south over Indonesia, to later rejoin land above northwest Australia.

We noticed, during climb, there was a slight glitch in the pressurization system, which caused some minor ear-popping and lack of air-conditioning. No other faults were apparent to us for the remainder of the flight. Twenty minutes into the climb, the seatbelt sign was switched off (it wouldn't come back on until descent), and to a cacophony of clinking seatbelts being unfastened the party began.

As we leveled off at our initial cruise of 35,000ft the Singapore Girls (and Boys) came through the cabin with generous servings of Charles Heidsieck Champagne, a finer vintage than that normally reserved for even business class. The convivial atmosphere was evocative of an era that ended in the Seventies. With a male-to-female ratio of 7:3, it felt slightly more like a decorous stag party, with the elegance factor high. Friendships were forged, business cards exchanged, and glasses clinked as people of 35 nationalities immersed themselves in this once-in-a-lifetime shared experience. The whisper-quietness of the cruise, thanks to those tranquil Trents, only heightened the ambience.

Onboard were four pilots, 31 flight attendants, and 455 passengers. Of the latter, the youngest was ten months old, the oldest a 91-year-old man in Suites flying with his son. The passenger manifest revealed that 28% were Australians, 14% were Singaporeans, 11% Britons, and 8% from the USA. Surprisingly, there were very few French and Germans. The couple in front of us, 50% of the representation from Germany, was the constant focus of two of that country's TV news crews.

As the drinks and canapé service continued, Oscar and I marveled at how the cabin attendants repeatedly performed excellent service with smiles and bonhomie, despite the jammed aisles. They were obviously proud to

have been selected to operate the flight and, with a few exceptions, had never previously flown on an A380.

With scant chop in the cruise, and feeling like Jonah of biblical fame, we embarked on our tour of the cavernous airborne 'whale'. Our upper deck perch revealed a cabin cross section which was essentially wider than that of an A340 stacked full-length on a wider cabin than that of a 747. Seat configurations of 2-4-2 upstairs and 3-4-3 on the lower deck yielded the widest economy seat I had ever sat in. The ultra-slim Weber seats had a footrest and nice recline angle, but were a little too firm. With a 34in (86cm) seat pitch, we weren't complaining, however. There were thoughtful touches: a 10.6in (27cm)-wide 'KrisWorld' screen, a vanity mirror in the fold-down tray, a seatback drink holder, coat rack, and even a small storage compartment for my glasses.

In spite of its magnificence, the most neglected feature onboard this flight was the next-generation Panasonic X2 KrisWorld system. It boasts 100 movies, 180 TV shows, 7,000 CDs, seat-to-seat calling, real-time news and travel





PHOTOS: KOK CHWEE SIM

The economy class cabin showing the bulkhead seat with a bassinet installed. On the main deck the layout is 3-4-3, with 2-3-2 on the upper deck. SIA A380-800s have 471 seats in total.



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Personal stowage space, and a cup holder installed in the seat back.

A pair of seats in New Business Class. Although similar to those on the Boeing 777-300ER, these are 4in (10cm) wider with greater pitch and have been re-contoured for greater comfort.

information, and an outstanding graphics user-interface reminiscent of an Apple Macintosh. With the floorshow garnering the most attention, most screens were tuned to the Airshow.

Moving forward into the upper deck business cabin, we were awestruck by the dramatic difference in noise and activity between the fun and frivolity in the back and sedate business class. The seats here, designed by James Park Associates, are very wide and high, almost like private suites themselves, and their occupants enjoyed complete privacy. The 60 sumptuous, tailored, leather seats—in a world-beating 1-2-1 layout in one long cabin on the upper deck—are the widest business seats in the sky. Two people can fit side-by-side in one of these plush airborne lounges. The seats are equipped with a superb 15.4in (39cm)-wide KrisWorld LCD (Liquid Crystal Display) screen into which you can plug a computer or iPod. The cabin felt so empty and businesslike that we almost felt sorry for the passengers.

Dubbed 'New Business Class' by SIA, the product was supposed to debut on the A380, but because of delivery delays it was introduced on the airline's 777-300ERs. This class, surprisingly, is the location of the only stand-up bar, which you would miss if you blinked. SIA clearly chose to forego the hype of showers, stores, and bars in favor of more space in all classes.

Descending the elegant staircase at the front of the aircraft while heading for First, we felt we were in a ship. But when we turned the corner, we revised our impressions to that of a private Pullman railroad car. First class, as such, doesn't exist on SIA's A380s; it is called 'Singapore Suites'. The airline levies a 25% surcharge for its premium cabins, and with good reason. These 12 suites are truly private rooms in a 1-2-1 layout. Designed by a French yacht designer and finished in rich red wood, they are almost 3ft (91.4cm) wide and feature an entirely separate bed that can fold into a double bed in the middle suites. For those wishing to engage in a *tête-à-tête* with a visitor, each suite has another seat. An ultra-deluxe touch is the custom-designed duvets, from the House of Givenchy, for the fold-out bed. Indeed, the 'gilded age' is alive and well in Singapore Suites.

After leaving this area of decadence, we made our way back to the party in the three lower deck economy cabins. Heading the 'A List' celebs was SIA Chief A380 Captain Robert Tang. He appeared almost shocked when he was mobbed for photographs and autographs. One woman jokingly asked who was flying the airplane, to which he responded while gesturing at his cell phone, "Which way do you want to go?" Tang graciously agreed to sign a copy of the *Airways* A380 issue (May 2006) and an A380 book. I guarantee that these cherished collectibles will never darken the pages of eBay. Finally, all the hero worship almost became too much for this apparently modest man as he departed economy class and, emulating Arnold Schwarzenegger, promised, "I'll be back!"



*There are only a dozen suites, designed by French yachting designer Jean-Jacques Coste: eight singles by the windows and two doubles in the middle of the cabin. Besides a first class seat and chaise lounge, each suite features a 78in (1.98m)-long bed, meeting/dining table, a wall-mounted 23in (58cm)-wide LCD screen, and coat closet. There is a privacy partition which may be raised and locked in position, but SIA says the suites are not sound-proof and, "If couples used our double beds to engage in inappropriate activity, we would politely ask them to desist."*



Other 'notables' included Thomas Lee (left), who had flown on Pan Am's first 747 service, and whose company designed the lavatory systems of the A380, which is why he was flushed with success! His wife Sally was the first president of the first Southwest Airlines flight attendant class. They turned heads with a plaque of two first commercial flight certificates: for the 747 and A380. Lee's father had surprised him with the 1970

trip, and now he was doing the same for his wife and daughter. Sylvain Pascaud of LCL Productions—who had spent five years documenting the building of the A380 for *Discovery*—and his crew were busily filming their final segments. CNN's Richard Quest held a simulated auction as he queried the cost passengers had paid for their tickets. Two passengers took orders for their very stylish custom-made 'A380 First Flight' T-shirts.

An entire family from Australia travelled together; the two sons had designed custom shirts as well, attracting much envy. An engineer from San Francisco celebrated his anniversary with 'Happy Birthday' sung by the crew and dry ice replacing candles. A travel agent from Perth, Australia, dazzled us with her stories of flying SIA's key inaugurals, such as Singapore to New York-Newark (*Airways*, October 2004). Australian celebrity chef Matt Moran and his Singapore counterpart



Sam Leong, who designed the in-flight meals, wore chef's uniforms and personally ensured the cuisine would be top-notch.

Many wondered aloud how SIA could outdo its already extraordinarily high cabin service levels. We would not be disappointed. So what kind of meal befits an occasion such as this? In economy, we were offered business class-quality meals and wine. I dined on a delicious Drunken Chicken starter, the main course of baked fillet of Chilean bass with fish noodles, followed by Ben and Jerry's ice cream. Oscar chose the cos salad with Greek feta and seared beef tenderloin. The sommelier's selection included a Rheingau Riesling Kabinett 2005 from Weinhauss Ress, and an Australian Elderton Barossa Valley Shiraz 2004. Our appetizing meals were served with aplomb by the wonderful cabin staff, who seemed pleased that people were back in their seats, so they could carry out their service.

Throughout the flight, the tap on Singapore's boundless generosity was never turned off. We were given framed and laminated certificates, signed by CEO Seng and Capt Tang, marking the occasion. The gift bags were bulging with a limited edition A380 model, Mont Blanc pens, and other wonderful mementos.

A little over six hours into the flight, over central New South Wales, Australia, the spoilers deployed, heralding our initial descent. Capt Tang came on to the PA with yet another surprise: we would perform a low pass over Sydney Harbour. The cabin erupted into a cacophony of



PHOTOS: CHRIS SLOAN





Capt Tang signing the copy of Airways.



ROB FINLAYSON

TVM Arrivals		18:24
Airline	Flight	From
QANTAS	QF124	Mumbai
QANTAS	QF380	Singapore
QANTAS	QF4	Honolulu
QANTAS	NZ100	Auckland
UNITED	UA2509	Auckland
QANTAS	CASTLE	Auckland
QANTAS	NZ907	Auckland
QANTAS	ADY101	Davao
QANTAS	QF32	London Singapore
QANTAS	BAT372	London Singapore



shouts and applause. Unfortunately, a low cloud cover dictated otherwise, and the fly-past was scrubbed. Even Tang was disappointed. Unusually, the cabin crew began the second snack service during the descent. They would not be deterred from pleasing us even as the crowds again blocking the aisles rendered their jobs difficult.

At 1715, Tang slowed the airplane to 138kt (less than a 747's landing speed) and the new Queen of the Skies kissed the runway at Sydney. Once again there was a volley of applause, and emotion hit a crescendo. Had the seatbelt sign not been illuminated, there would have been a standing ovation. During the rollout with thrust reversers deployed (only two of the four engines are so equipped), we noticed the airport had ground to a halt, with cheering crowds of spectators, and TV news cameras on the ground and aloft in helicopters. We blocked into the gate one minute early at 1724, 7hr 6min after leaving Singapore. But no-one really wanted to disembark. This was fortunate, as it took Sydney ground staff a few minutes to position the new A380-compatible airbridges. Oscar and I were last off after a special cockpit visit, courtesy of Capt Tang. All of us were greeted by a clamoring

media contingent, and were handed copies of *The Sydney Morning Herald* with a front page headline blaring: 'Jumbo Lands In Sydney!' We all became instant celebrities, if only for a moment.

The moment of truth arrived for A380 first-flighters when it

came time to collect our baggage. I am sure extra staff had been rostered, because everyone had their luggage within 30 minutes, with most receiving it earlier. Heaving our bags of Singapore swag toward the terminal exit, we were serenaded by yet another quartet—this time in baggage claim.

When we reached our hotel, we saw coverage of the A380 landing and arrival splashed across the world's TV networks, the extent of which surprised even us. Capping off this remarkable and memorable day, Timothy Spahr invited everyone to a great A380 'after party' where he used a hacksaw to decapitate a scale model of the dethroned queen, a 747. We had gone from the sublime to the surreal, that much is certain.

Sitting on an A340-500 18-hour flight to Newark from Singapore, reminiscing about one magical moment after another, it occurred to me why this was such a beautiful, profound occasion. In an era of a litany of bad news, worries for the future, and turmoil, it was truly uplifting to see what mankind could accomplish. I was too young to watch man walk on the Moon for the first time, but I imagine that on a certain level this was what it was like when the world came together to celebrate a truly historic occasion, one unlikely to be repeated in my lifetime, if only for a day. →



(Chris Sloan is president and owner of 2C Media, a major television production company, and webmaster and creator of the online airliner museum [www.airhive.com](http://www.airhive.com).)



Flight SQ380 lands at Sydney, completing the maiden commercial flight of the A380. Regularly scheduled service between Singapore and Sydney (SQ221/222) began on Sunday, October 28. Thirteen A380s are due for delivery in 2008, to SIA, Emirates, and Qantas, with 25 deliveries scheduled in 2009 and 45 in 2010.