

Anne Giacomantonio took her first flight on an Airbus A380 this year – and she loved every minute

DOUBLE DECKER AIRBUS

For many people living in the UK, the only possibility of experiencing a flight on the A380 Airbus will be if they are planning a long-haul holiday to Asia or – before too long – the United States or the Middle East. For a few of you, business might allow an encounter with this beast of a plane, but with only six currently in operation the chances are still pretty slim. Slimmer still are the chances of experiencing the on-board luxuries of private suites with a full-size bed and en-suite shower, or the business areas which allow passengers to mingle in a bar environment on what is the largest airliner in service today.

The Airbus A380 first came into service with Singapore Airlines seven months ago, carrying passengers on its Singapore-London route. Emirates has now also added A380s to its fleet on the Dubai to New York route, with imminent plans to include London, Sydney and Auckland among its destinations.

This summer I was lucky enough to fly one leg of my journey to Australia on this mammoth. As soon as I saw “A380” on my itinerary my heart skipped a beat. An over-reaction perhaps, but when you have the prospect of 22 hours flight time ahead of you, seeing the words “extra leg room” and “lower onboard noise levels for significantly reduced fatigue” written on a page is very exciting.

Even more exciting were the words “top deck” printed on my boarding pass. Unfortunately,



ROOM FOR MANOEUVRE: the giant A380 is similar in size to the Great Sphinx of Giza – and pilots appreciate the spaciousness

boarding the plane didn't involve any intrepid navigation of internal stairs; there were separate entrances for the upper and lower decks. Even before that, reaching the extra-large plane involved walking what felt like the length of Heathrow: the plane only fits at the very ends of the terminals, so special piers have been built to accommodate its immensity.

The A380 is a feat of engineering: measuring 73m long and 24.1m high, it can take off with a maximum onboard weight of 560 tonnes, including 310,000 litres of fuel. The aeroplane was produced in Toulouse, by Airbus (owned by EADS and the UK's BAE Systems), with its 79m wing span built in Broughton, North Wales and four Trent 9000 engines made by Rolls-Royce. Other parts of the



plane were manufactured in Spain and Germany. In an all-economy set-up, the A380 is capable of carrying approximately 850 passengers; Singapore Airlines, however, carries 471 passengers across three classes, and Emirates 489.

So, what is it like to fly something comparable in length to the Great Sphinx of Giza? Captain Abbas Talib Shaban is the chief pilot on an A380 for Emirates. He has completed six flights so far and says that despite the aircraft's colossal size it is surprisingly easy to handle, helped by the very latest technology. “The flight deck layout is comparable to previous Airbus aircraft with a number of modifications,” he says; the A380 only requires two people on the flight deck like most commercial planes. And his favourite feature? “The feeling of

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spaciousness and the low sound levels throughout the aircraft are top of my list.”

I'd have to agree. When I got to my seat during my own A380 experience, the spaciousness that is so often noted in the promotional literature was very real. I had more room in my comfy seat and, because I was sitting by the window, a large storage compartment on hand; no standing up in the aisle to get to overhead storage for me! I could really appreciate the sheer size of the cabin; it felt as if we were flying to Singapore in a mansion.

Emirates-licensed engineer Murray Cranston thinks that one of the best new features is the on-board digital maintenance aids, which reduce the need to rely on ground-based facilities for information. Lucky enough to be selected as a member of the team that escorted the Emirates A380 on a promotional tour of the United States, Cranston had a smooth flight. “It's a quiet aircraft to fly in and is very stable in any turbulence,” he says. With 57 more A380s on order for Emirates, make sure you grab your chance to catch a flight as soon as you can.