EIGHT YEAR OLD SINGAPORE SUITES REMAINS STRONG FIRST CLASS CONTENDER

News / Airlines

The best part of a decade on from its October 2007 introduction into service, **Singapore Airlines' Suites** class still has it. Cashing in a stack of frequent flyer points to fly from LAX to Tokyo Narita, I was surprised by how well the product has stood up against an increasing amount — and pace — of competition.

The LAX lounge was very pleasant, the Kyo-kaiseki food was exquisite, the Dom Pérignon and Krug sparkled, an afternoon wine tasting on board was delightful, and the crew were truly excellent — but let's talk hard product, because that's how Singapore Airlines' Suites on the A380 truly differs from first class on other aircraft.

When it debuted nearly a decade ago, the A380's massive size posed problems for airports — how do we handle this enormous airliner, which requires at least two floors' worth of jetways? — but the resulting facilities mean that, when three jetways are provided, first class often gets its own. In terms of a premium experience, being one of twelve people walking down what feels like your own personal jetway helps to set the scene for a memorable flight.

Inside the A380, the space at doors M1 doesn't feel like anything special: unlike the Korean Air A380, there's no bar, and indeed no attempt to brand this area as a way in to the sanctum of first class. This is perhaps an omission, though perhaps one that's forgivable since SQ was the first airline to create an A380 first class, prior to the trend of designing welcoming entryways and common spaces. Perhaps the next generation of A380s will make better use of this space with

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premium surfaces, mood lighting and some of that Singapore Airlines magic.

In the context of the Emirates, Etihad and Qatar Airways cabins, it's surprising just how calmingly muted the colours of the Suites cabin feel, especially on an afternoon flight. My aircraft had not been refitted with the slightly darker, less red leather, but it didn't feel dated (unlike, say, the dripping-with-walnut-and-brass Emirates suites).

The curving aisle does a lot to take away the feeling that there is rank upon rank of cabins — the antithesis of, say, ANA's design language, which is all about the sharp edges. The wood effect, dark enough to be elegant without going so dark as to conflict with the off-white of the rest of the cabin, is also pleasing.

With no overhead bins, the space is airy and bright over the suite walls, and even with the doors closed and shades drawn the cabin never feels too dark. This is impressive industrial design, even eight years after introduction.

The doors and walls of the suite are notable: pull-down blinds made partly of a woven reed-style matting and partly of a textured artificial fabric separate passengers from the rest of the cabin. The softer materials also help to reduce the noise level in the cabin. Given the quietness of the downstairs main deck area on the A380, and the fact that there are only twelve passengers in the cabin, it's a particular trick to dampen the sound of one or two voices or a few glasses clinking rather than the murmur of a larger cabin.

Inside the suite, Singapore Airlines' seat is unique. Rather than the usual seat that reclines into a bed — the norm until Etihad's Apartment product — the SQ seat folds forwards to enable a bunk to flip down, Murphy bed style, from the rear wall of the suite. The principal benefit is theoretically that the seat is designed to be a seat, and the bed is designed to be a bed, with materials and cushioning chosen specifically for those purposes rather than required to serve double-duty as a seat and as a bed.

In seat mode, the biggest functional difference with other seats was the movable armrests. One of the delights of first class is being able to curl up in several positions within a large seat, and flipping up one or both of the armrests expanded the range of positions, particularly compared with other airlines' products. Notably, the legrest and footrest extended all the way to the ottoman bench opposite, which was ideal for kicking back and relaxing while reading a book.

Conversion to bed mode is swiftly done by the crew — by the time I'd brushed my teeth the bed had been set up for me in a spare seat, although I did watch with much interest as the crew converted one of the double beds in the centre of the cabin for the couple occupying that pair.

The bed's surface was supremely comfortable, and the clever cupholders and surfaces that are revealed in bed mode were very welcome, but the bunk did seem narrow. There may be weight and structural support reasons to make the bunk quite so trim, but this would seem to be an excellent opportunity to improve the product in the next-generation version of Suites, which Singapore Airlines is expected to introduce with its next tranche of A380s.

The inflight entertainment screen, however, was a let-down. I realise it's eight years old, but the screen size has not kept up with expectations. My 13" laptop screen, placed on the table, gave a larger viewing surface compared with the 23" IFE screen, and the video quality of my laptop was markedly better despite not being a Retina display.

In a product where there is clearly very little chance of the screen coming into contact with a

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passenger during head impact criterion (HIC) tests, it's surprising that the screen size has not been increased during mid-life upgrades. A key opportunity for the airline (and for the wider inflight entertainment industry) in this space is to ensure that first class IFE can be upgraded in a simple, probably modular, and certainly cost-effective way to whatever the next big technology is. A plug-and-play approach to first class entertainment screens — where HIC is less of a concern than in economy or even business — may well reap **#PaxEx** benefits.

I also found the half-dozen ads before each movie on the IFE system very disappointing. In terms of content I wanted to watch, however, the selection was decent, although the audio quality of the music on board (particularly the classical choices) was not. Old MP3s I ripped from classical CDs fifteen years ago sounded better over the noise-cancelling earphones.

At the end of the day — indeed, at the end of my flight — I found myself struck by just how impressed I was with what is really an eight year old hard product. Singapore Airlines is to be commended for its foresightful industrial design and the excellent passenger experience. It will be fascinating to see how the next generation of suites in Suites builds on this baseline.

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