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Spas in the Sky: Inside the Big Jets

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The mammoth Airbus A380 may not quite live up to its maker's marketing hype as "the eighth wonder of the world."

But the first three airlines to fly the world's largest passenger plane are pulling out all the stops to help travelers forget they're packed inside with almost 500 other people. [Singapore Airlines](#), Dubai's [Emirates Airlines](#) and Australia's [Qantas Airways Ltd.](#) are using their new A380s to push the envelope on cushiness, entertainment and design.

The best goodies are, as to be expected, in first class. Singapore Air's "Sky Suites" are so big they include both a seat and a bed, appointed with sheets and dishware designed by French fashion house Givenchy. Emirates has two "shower spas" with heated floors, where first-class fliers can book 25-minute sessions, including a five-minute shower. Qantas's first-class seat spreads into a bed that is half the width of a queen-size mattress.

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Singapore Airlines touts its 'Sky Suites' for first-class passengers on the superjumbo A380.

There are also new offerings in coach class, where all three carriers are providing electric sockets in almost every seat and, for a fee, Internet connections -- features found until recently only in premium cabins.

Qantas, which got its first A380 last week, has decked its economy class with snack bars, where passengers can grab nibbles and drinks. The interior's designer, Marc Newson, has also carved out extra leg space from the back of each seat and engineered a seat that tips up at the front as the back reclines.

"It's a small detail, but it makes a difference," says Mr. Newson, a Paris-based Australian designer whose aviation-inspired furniture pieces have sold for more than \$1 million at auction.

Globe-hoppers will get the chance to compare the planes directly in coming months, as the three rivals start putting their A380s head-to-head on routes between London and Sydney.

Singapore Air is flying to London, Tokyo and Sydney from Singapore with its six A380s. A Singapore-London round-trip ticket in business class, for example, runs for around \$6,700 on the airline's Web site. The airline says its fancy new premium-class seats, which are on both the A380 and some of its other planes, cost more than its older seats.

Emirates now flies to New York from Dubai, with a round-trip business class ticket at almost \$6,600 -- the same fare as older planes on the route.

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Qantas plans its first flight, to Los Angeles, from Melbourne, Australia, on Oct. 20. The round-trip business class ticket is roughly \$18,000, similar to on older models, although first class -- at over \$25,000 -- is a bit more expensive. Qantas says there may be times when first- and business class passengers will be charged more to fly on the A380 vs. a smaller aircraft. (Coach fares are the same as on existing models, all three carriers say.)

Fliers expecting an ever-escalating war of amenities may be disappointed, however. [Air France-KLM SA](#), which gets its first A380 next year, plans few novel extravaganzas. "Most of the plane will be filled with seats," says Deputy CEO Pierre-Henri Gourgeon.

The airlines themselves are paying a high price for the fancy seating and electrical wiring on the A380. Airbus has faced so many problems installing the highly customized cabling that the jumbo planes are being delivered to airlines some two years behind schedule. Airbus parent [European Aeronautic Defense & Space Co.](#) has swallowed billions of dollars in cost overruns and faced months of management upheaval due to the problems. Airbus officials say more delivery delays could still crop up.

Airline executives have fumed at the holdups, but "the A380 is worth the wait," said Singapore Airlines Chief Executive Chew Choon Seng, when Singapore took possession of its first superjumbo last fall.

Why is the plane so special? For one thing, it's very quiet inside, thanks to efficient new engines. The plane also has nearly 50% more floor area than [Boeing Co.](#)'s biggest 747 jumbo jet, which was previously the largest passenger plane. But the A380 can carry only about 35% more passengers than a 747, which means each person gets more space, on average.

The cabin feels roomier than a 747's and has more storage space, says Peter Morris, chief economist at Ascend Worldwide Ltd., an aviation consulting firm in London. Mr. Morris has flown two round-trips to Singapore in economy class on Singapore Airlines A380s.

"It was noticeably different" from a 747, says Mr. Morris.

The A380 has two decks, each divided by two aisles, like other big planes. All three carriers board each deck separately, which means the boarding and exiting experience shouldn't be very different from existing big jetliners.

Specific elements of the cabin layout that are key to passenger comfort -- such as the amount of legroom between seats and the number of toilets -- are up to each airline. And there's no escaping that the superjumbo is ultimately a giant people-mover, because economy class remains a forest of seats. With at least 36 passengers per toilet, for example, the A380 offers no improvement over current proportions for long-haul planes.

Anne Banas, executive editor of Web site SmarterTravel.com, says feedback at sister site SeatGuru.com has been thumbs-down regarding coach class aboard Singapore Air and Emirates' A380s.

"The consensus we've gotten is that economy class feels like a cattle car," Ms. Banas says.

Business class is more luxurious, but it's still no flying palace. For airlines, the business cabin is considered the profit sweet spot, potentially combining higher ticket revenues than coach with greater passenger numbers than first class.

Ever since [British Airways PLC](#) a decade ago offered the first business-class seat to spread out into a fully flat bed -- gobbling up valuable floor space -- carriers world-wide have been leap-frogging to squeeze comfort and personal space into dense seating plans.

The result on board both Singapore and Emirates is a business cabin that still feels a bit crowded.

Singapore, however, makes up for that by giving each passenger space in an unusual way. The legroom between rows is a comfortable 55 inches -- roughly average for the industry. But the seat is so wide, at 34 inches, that two slim people could share it.

Emirates' business class is far less roomy. Rows are staggered, so that as each seat spreads out into a bed, it slots into a cubby where passengers can stick their feet. The cubby's top serves as a side table and minibar for the passenger who's sitting in front. While useful, it's oddly high, at around chest-height for a sitting passenger.



Getty Images

An Airbus A380 flown by Emirates Airlines comes with two 'shower spas.'

Moreover, Emirates' business-class seats are barely wider than those in coach. Seat rows are also only 48 inches apart, which is less legroom than many cash-strapped U.S. carriers offer in business class. Spokesman Mike Simon says that distance "becomes less of a concern when the passenger is able to lie fully flat" and that the seat "provides a high level of privacy and personal space."

Emirates so far has only one A380, in service since August, so passengers haven't yet passed judgment on the cabin. Emirates officials say the business-class lounge area and bar -- complete with bartender -- at the back of the plane is a big hit. Passengers seated at the rear of business class might find the partying a bit noisy, but at least Emirates doesn't play music in the bar.

Qantas takes a more traditional approach with rows of business-class seats, though with lots of legroom. As a bed, the seat stretches 80 inches, which is longer than the first-class beds on either Emirates or Singapore.

First class is where all three carriers have gone over the top. "We were looking for a level of luxury akin to private jets," says Mr. Simon at Emirates.

Both Emirates and Singapore have created compartments with sliding doors for total privacy. Qantas deliberately eschewed a door because passenger surveys indicated it felt claustrophobic, says designer Mr. Newson. Instead, curved screens offer seclusion.