

High flyers

Pampering ultra high-net-worth passengers is the way to go for airlines in the fight for the First Class dollar

By RAHITA ELIAS



SPOILT FOR CHOICE
(Main picture and far left) SIA Suites; First Class passengers have the 'Book the Cook' option to pre-order from a range of gourmet meals, such as lobster thermidor

IT'S time to kick back and relax. The chef has prepared you a hot meal cooked a la minute. After the meal served on fine china and washed down with some excellent bubbly, it's time for a refreshing shower before slipping under the silk covers of your freshly turned down bed for some much-needed shut-eye. By the time you wake up, you're just a couple of hours away from your destination.

Welcome to the rarefied world of First Class flight travel.

Far from the madding crowd of squashed seats and set meals served on plastic plates with plastic cutlery, First Class is a soothing, gentle world of pampering, privacy and peace. It is also head and shoulders above Business Class.

First Class tickets tend to be almost double the price of Business Class fares. While a return Singapore Airlines Business Class ticket to London Heathrow will cost a little under \$8,000, going First Class will burn a nearly \$15,000 hole in your pocket. On Emirates, flying return on Business Class will cost more than \$6,000 while going First Class will set you back over \$11,000. Airlines generally do not give discounts for upgrading your Business Class ticket to First Class.

Those who choose to fly First Class rather than Business want that extra exclusivity and luxury it offers. For Singapore Airlines (SIA), says an airline spokesman, its First Class passengers include top management of companies and business owners.

SIA has certainly made its mark in the First Class travel market. According to Flightfox, an online marketplace of flight specialists, SIA's Suites came out tops in a survey of the best First Class cabins. Suites

are available on several routes, the more popular being London, Los Angeles, New York, Paris, Sydney and Zurich.

The Singapore national carrier offers two types of First Class experiences. Suites are available on its Airbus A380 aircraft, while Boeing B777-300ERs and the refitted B777-300 aircraft feature First Class seats.

Each individual suites cabin features sliding doors and window blinds, so the passenger can decide on the level of privacy preferred. Passengers have the "Book the Cook" option to pre-order from a wide range of gourmet meals, created by the world's most sought-after culinary masters. They can also catch the latest Hollywood blockbuster on their 23-inch (58-centimetre) LCD screen.

First Class passengers on the Boeings enjoy a world of comfort too. Their seats are 35 inches wide and convert into 82-inch long fully flat beds. In comparison, Business Class seats are 28 inches wide and 78 inches long.

Giving SIA a run for its First Class money are the Middle Eastern airlines, who also go to great lengths to deliver luxury to this elite clientele.

Andrew Bunn, Emirates country manager, Singapore and Brunei, says: "Emirates First Class attracts a wide range of passenger types, but what they do have in common is that they are people who appreciate a premium travel experience that sets them in a class of their own. First Class passengers expect the very best in service, comfort and luxury from the moment their journey begins."

Perhaps the ultimate in-flight luxury is the shower facilities that Emirates offers onboard its A380s.

Mr Bunn says: "Passengers travelling First Class



SKY'S THE LIMIT

(Above) Emirates First Class passengers may refresh mid-flight at the Shower Spas; each suite comes equipped with a massage-enabled leather seat, which converts into a flat bed



PHOTOS: EMIRATES

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says: "Etihad Airways has enjoyed strong demand for its Singapore services since starting the route to Brisbane and Abu Dhabi in 2007. The introduction of First Class to the route in June 2015 recognises the demand for luxury air travel to and from Singapore and the potential to develop this segment of the market further."

He adds that each First Class guest has his or her own private suite with a five-foot-seven-inch sliding screen door. Each suite comes with a fully flat, six-foot-eight-inch, extra-wide bed upholstered in Poltrona Frau leather – the same leather in Ferrari cars. It also has a 23-inch cinematic widescreen personal entertainment system, a mini-bar and a personal wardrobe.

First Class passengers can tuck themselves under pure dupion silk and cotton duvets and rest their heads on full-sized pillows. Suites located in the middle of the cabin feature a movable divider allowing passengers travelling in pairs to "share" a room.

Instead of pre-cooked meals, First Class passengers can enjoy freshly prepared dishes onboard.

Mr Hogan says: "Guests are spoiled for choice with a selection of restaurant-style dining options. Every dish is individually prepared by a professional inflight chef from a larder fully stocked with fresh produce. Whatever you prefer the inflight chef can prepare a meal to suit guests' individual preferences."

Catering to the whims and fancies of this discerning and demanding group of passengers is clearly the way to go for airlines in the dogfight for the First Class dollar. These high-net-worth individuals can therefore look forward to even more luxurious offerings in the skies, taking the term "high flyers" to a whole new stratosphere. **W**



PHOTOS: ETIHAD AIRWAYS



LAP OF LUXURY

(Above and left) Etihad Airways' suite comes with a fully flat six-foot-eight-inch bed; it also has a personal entertainment system, a mini-bar and a personal wardrobe