

High on luxury

The upgrade gods were smiling when **Mike O'Connor** boarded Singapore Airline's A380

YOU could fit an elephant into the business-class seat of an A380. Not a terribly large elephant, but an elephant nonetheless.

If Singapore Airlines has designed these 86cm-wide seat proportions based on the projected growth in size of the average set of human buttocks, then the race is doomed to an obesity-driven extinction.

The invitation to fly on the first commercial A380 flight between Sydney and Singapore had specified economy class. At check-in, the upgrade gods smiled and this became business class — seat 18K — a window seat on the right-hand side of the aircraft on the upper of its two decks and one of 60 business-class seats on board.

For one confusing moment as I slid into the cubicle I thought it was intended to seat two people. One seatbelt, however, equalled one passenger — me.

The airline is hoping business-class travellers will be drawn to its product because it offers the largest personal space and seat on the market.

Comfort and bragging rights raise the bar several notches. All other airlines will now have to play catch-up or risk losing their share of the lucrative, high-margin, premium market.

Singapore is also presuming people will pay more to enjoy this new level of comfort and prestige, 20 per cent more to be precise which is the loading it is applying to first- and business-class seats on the Singapore-Sydney and return flights being flown by the one A380 it has in service. Other airlines will doubtless do the same as their aircraft come on-line.

Economy fares, however, will be the same as those on a Boeing 747-400.

As the aircraft began its first commercial take-off run from Sydney International Airport, delayed by two hours because of an electrical storm, the difference between it and last generation aircraft was immediately apparent.

It's all to do with noise or rather the lack of it for the A380 is eerily quiet. It floated along the taxiway, the low hum of its four Rolls-Royce engines barely audible. As take-off power was applied the engine pitch increased a few octaves but apart from the surge of acceleration pushing you gently back into your seat, there was little to indicate the 654-tonne aircraft was about to become airborne.

A few minutes into the flight, the engine note deepened as it climbed to its 10,000m cruising height but once this was reached, tranquillity ruled once more.

To the rear of the business-class cabin, which stretches from the front and half-way along the top deck, is economy class.

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UP-MARKET ... the A380 business-class interior, top, offers the largest personal space and seat on the market; the jet had its first commercial flight between Sydney and Singapore.



At the rear of the top deck, a spiral staircase descends to the lower deck and the balance of the 399 economy seats while at the front of the lower deck are the 12 first-class suites. With the launch of the A380, the chasm between economy and business became a canyon.

It is true economy-class passengers fare better on the new aircraft than on any other.

The high definition seat-back screens are larger at 27cm and now access the airline's truly amazing Krisworld entertainment system — 100 on-demand movies, 180 TV channels, 700 music CDs and 20 radio channels.

Width is said to have been increased by 5cm to 48cm, seat backs are now sculpted to provide more knee and legroom and there's a reading light set into the seat back which is less intrusive for your neighbour than one mounted overhead.

The handset operating the entertainment systems is also set in to the seat back as is a power socket for laptop computers.

The seats are a definite improvement. I swapped my spacious berth for one for a short time and there is more space but it's still economy and you're still rubbing shoulders with your fellow travellers.

It's obvious the luxury being accorded premium-class travellers is now the airline's focus. Subdued lighting, chocolate-brown and beige leather seats which are actually sofas that fold down to a flat bed and the level of privacy accorded each guest have turned business-class into a club.

Premium class is now becoming part of the travel experience, as aspirational as a five-star hotel room with ocean views over three-star accommodation overlooking the parking lot.

The sad news is it's also becoming more expensive for the simple, market-driven reason that more and more people are prepared, and able, to pay for it.

The writer travelled as a guest of Singapore Airlines

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