



TRUE CONFESSIONS

From First Class

Who says that flying always has to be a drag? Not **JOSH DEAN**. He finally gets to take the vacation of his dreams: totally airborne, totally luxury.

Remember when the idea of taking a completely airborne vacation first came to me. I was flying to Buenos Aires from New York with a friend and, through some mix of divine intervention, shameless wheedling, and unexpected ticket-counter friendliness, we got ourselves upgraded to business. Ten hours later, on the descent into B.A., I grudgingly relinquished my Champagne flute and said to

my companion, "This is nice. I'd be happy to keep flying."

It wasn't the first time I'd flown business, but it was the first time I'd seriously considered the difference between economy and the finer classes. It's more than a bigger seat and better food, something like a paradigm shift, that turns a long flight from a test of endurance into a pleasurable experience. But could flying first-class on its own—no sightseeing allowed—be a vacation in

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Consuming Passions

and of itself? In an effort to answer that question, and to gauge the current state of high-end air travel, I decided then that one day I would circumnavigate the globe in first class, making as few stops as possible over the course of three days, without ever leaving airplane or airport.

Two years later I was still fumbling with the logistics, the most difficult being putting together an itinerary that didn't require hideously long layovers or crazy connections. Airlines, you will not be shocked to hear, are not set up to ease the passage of a single person flying one-way legs around the world.

I decided I would fly three world-famous first-class carriers: Singapore, India's relaunched Jet Airways, and Virgin Atlantic. My route would total nearly 35 hours in the air from San Francisco to New York via Seoul, Singapore, Mumbai, and London.

Singapore Airline's first-class lounge in San Francisco does not dazzle, but that hardly matters once you're aboard the Boeing 777-300ER, settling into what is not so much a seat as a personal lounge: It comprises a reclining love seat across from a second padded bench that I can barely reach without stretching, both swaddled in caramel-colored leather and surrounded by a mini cabin of burnished wood. For entertainment there is a 23-inch LCD television featuring more than 30 on-demand movies, dozens of shows, and a bunch of games I didn't even get a chance to sample. It would be an exaggeration to say the space is about the size of an old studio apartment of mine, but only a slight one.

Within minutes an attendant with a sharp suit and a big, toothy smile is filling a flute with a bottle of Dom Pérignon cradled in his arms like an infant. He has barely left before a beautiful woman in green silk steps into the void. Her name is Alyce, her accent a mellifluous form of British-accented English.

"Mr. Dean, would you like some pajamas and a toilet kit?"

In the seat next to me—and "next" in this cabin means that I would have to speak loudly just to get his attention—an Asian gentleman has already kicked off his shoes and put on his tan Givenchy pajamas.

A few minutes after takeoff, Alyce is back. "Mr. Dean, I've got some socks and slippers for you." She also has some satay and a wickedly hot towel.

THE SHORT LIST*

LUXURY AIR TRAVEL AT ITS BEST

*For this highly opinionated guide to favorite routes and carriers, DEPARTURES consulted with dozens of the smartest and most frequent business- and first-class travelers it knows.

OVERALL SERVICE

With its superior beds, food, and staff, **Singapore Airlines** always ranks high. It basically defined modern first-class service by melding sleeping pods with Dom Pérignon and designer pajamas. Check-in is by personal invitation—no lines, no waiting. But **Emirates** is raising the stakes with its ultraluxe pods. Even if your route doesn't offer them yet, most of the international first-class passengers already enjoy flatbeds, plus chauffeurs to the airport and personal porters upon arrival.

CHECK-IN

Is there anything better than arriving a leisurely 30 minutes before departure at **Silverjet's** Dunhill-furnished terminal at London's Luton Airport, allowing you just enough time to preselect from the extensive in-flight menu options before receiving your personal boarding invitation? The only competition is **Lufthansa's** first-class terminal in Frankfurt, where an assistant checks you in via PDA and will bring you one of the airline's 70 malt whiskeys while you wait. When it's time to board, you're zipped straight to the plane in a Porsche or a Mercedes-Benz.

SEATS

Lying inside a first-class pod on **All Nippon Airways'** long-haul flights is like being alone in your bedroom. The convertible seat, 33 inches wide and 77 inches long, is enclosed by walls; a down-filled pillow and duvet complete the illusion. With a similar design, **Singapore Airlines'** new leather-and-mahogany flatbed seats are, at 35 inches, the widest of all airlines'. Though not encased in a pod, **Japan Airlines'** Italian leather Skysleeper Solo is shaped to match the body's curves and features a built-in massager.

COMBATING JET LAG

Emirates' sleeping pods allow you to close the door to your suite (which has a vanity, closet, and private minibar) and set a DO NOT DISTURB sign. But what will really help your circadian rhythms is the ceiling: It is perpetually lit to mimic the sky at your destination, from high noon to dusk to starry night.

If there's a signature amenity of first (or business) class, it's surely the hot towel, a luxury presented seemingly hourly and with the ritual of a knighting: the steaming cloth arranged on a sterling-silver tray. All the better to prepare my hands for *malossol* caviar and royal smoked salmon, followed by Cantonese-style lotus root soup with peanuts and pork, followed by an amuse-bouche (referred to as "a surprise" by the attendant) of watermelon gelatin, followed by Korean-style fish fillet with spicy sauce, all of it served on Givenchy china and accompanied by a 2005 Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand recommended by the wine specialist, who felt the 2003 Domaine Laroche Chablis Premier Cru Les Fourchaumes Vieilles Vignes didn't pair so well with the peppery bite of the fish. Dessert is berry compote topped with vanilla rice pudding. I skip the cheese plate. And the Godiva chocolates.

We're not even an hour into the flight, still 5,000 miles from a stop in Seoul, and already I'm worried that it won't be enough time.

Two movies later I ring Alyce for assistance in the transformation of my cabin from lounge to bedroom. In barely a minute she has origami'd the chair into a giant bed that could easily accommodate another person. I fluff the three soft pillows, tuck myself under the duvet, and commence a nap that carries on undisturbed until we are an hour out of Seoul.

Naturally, it's time to eat again.

"Would you like some wine with dinner, Mr. Dean?" Alyce inquires.

Seoul to Singapore brings a new crew and new concerns about my routine. I order a Bordeaux and consider for a second that this may be inappropriate. Back home it's morning, but who cares? I'm on vacation!

I manage to fight off the next meal for a few hours, waiting to order it until I'm good and hungry again. There is more caviar, some lobster, and the creamy, ducky goodness of pâté. Ho hum.

I've already lost count of the hot towels.

When we arrive in Singapore it's 12:24 A.M. and 83 degrees, not that it matters because heat is only an issue when you have to go outdoors. Changi Airport is a shiny complex of fancy shops, restaurants, and such amenities as a rooftop swimming pool, a full-service gym, and free Internet terminals. Workers are pulling down the last storefront gates as I pull my roller suitcase—

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full of clean clothes, the need for which is now mostly obviated by the fancy pajamas they keep giving me—toward the Silver Kris lounge, where I will shower and catch some rest while waiting for the relatively short morning flight to Mumbai.

One of the most troubling things about this vacation is that I am traveling to distant places I've never before been and yet don't get a chance to set foot on terra firma. When people later ask me if I've been to India, I'm not sure what to say. Sort of, yes. And also no.

Like everything in India, Jet Airways is growing, and fast. It recently purchased 20 new wide-body airliners from Boeing and Airbus and in May added first-class service between Mumbai and London and in August between Mumbai and New York via Brussels. I am whisked by one of Jet's officials from my arrival gate through the hot, dirty, and (in spots) smelly terminal—which, to be fair, is under renovation—to one of those planes: a spanking new Boeing 777-300ER staffed by a cadre of attractive young Indian women in long canary-yellow Nehru jackets.

Jet's strategy is in part to target the high-end market dominated by Asian airlines like Singapore and Cathay, and the company's ambition is bold—to crack the world's top-five airlines. Its business class, called Première, has partially walled-off pods with seats that fold down to 73-inch-long lay-flat beds. Up front, eight lucky passengers, one of whom is me, get something even more ridiculous: a cabin with sliding doors and a seat that converts into an 83-inch bed that could comfortably fit an NBA power forward. Each "suite" has a 23-inch LCD screen featuring on-demand and a personal closet for hanging up whatever clothing is replaced by the tan pajamas delivered, like everything else, on a silver platter.

By this point I have given up any effort to keep track of what time it is. My laptop is set to New York, my watch to San Francisco, and my brain to a time zone that resists definition. In First-Class Land, it is always time for Champagne.

For the next nine hours my plan is to drink Dom, eat Indian food, and watch movies. As all these things are likely to induce sleep, I will then convert the bed, shut the doors of Suite 1K, and take a nap until it is time to eat again.

I wake to a flight attendant with a pixie cut smiling outside my suite. "Shall I make

★ FOOD

Gone are the days of freeze-dried chicken. First-class passengers on **Gulf Air** receive three-course dinners freshly prepared by an onboard chef, complete with sorbet, and there are Hindu, gluten-free, and low-purine options, to name a few. **Austrian Airlines** has also placed chefs on board, and after dinner the cabin turns into a café offering 11 varieties of Viennese coffee. On **Singapore Airlines** fliers can order their entrées in advance, and on certain routes they can experience *kyo-kaiseki*, the authentic Kyoto-style tea ceremony meal, or the ten-course Chinese feast called *Shi Quan Shi Mei*.

★ CREW FASHION

Long-defunct Braniff first made flight attendants fashionable with Pucci mini-skirts and helmetlike hats during the Swinging Sixties. Today a few airlines have maintained that emphasis on style: **Air France** outfits its employees in Christian Lacroix's navy shifts, structured jackets accented with red belts, and sky-blue cowl-neck sweaters. And former Givenchy designer Julien McDonald created tailored suits for the **British Airways** crew, complete with a proper cravat and a pillbox hat from milliner Stephen Jones.

★ AMENITIES

Pampering is no longer the province of hotels alone. In the first-class **Cathay Pacific** cabin, passengers are given poplin Shanghai Tang pj's and cozy slippers. **Japan Airlines'** Shiseido-packed amenity kits are keepers, especially when paired with the quirky yet ingenious green-bamboo foot massager and a honeycomb mask that covers your nose and mouth to ward off the drying recycled cabin air. The invigorating ClarinsMen's Défatigant Visage gel supplied on **Air France** ensures you'll disembark looking like you got a full night's sleep, even if you didn't.

★ WINE

Red or white? Airlines have officially moved past the overly simple paradigm. **American Airlines** consultant Diane Teitelbaum chooses new selections year-round from wineries all over the world; first-class passengers can enjoy *grand cru* Chablis, vintage port, and, en route to Japan, even a *daiginjo* sake. **Qantas** shows off the glories of Australian wines, with a 50-page guide full of tasting notes and introductions to newer wine regions, such as Tasmania and Queensland.

you up a chair, Mr. Dean, or would you like to keep the cozy bed?"

Triangulating my various timepieces, I figure I've been out for at least four hours.

"I think that's enough sleep for now," I tell her.

"Would you care for some tea? A nice Indian masala? It has lots of herbs and spices that are good for the system."

After tea there is popcorn presented in adorable little yellow-and-white-striped boxes, followed by yet another meal called a light snack but composed of four courses. Another day of this and I'm going to have to start jogging in the aisles.

Out the window England appears—tiny patches of forest dot a landscape of rolling fields bordered by stone walls and hedgerows. Red-roof cottages cluster into villages.

I have to hand it to Jet's customer service. We, the first-class customers, are loaded onto one of those airport golf carts that beep incessantly and whisked what seems like a mile through the corridors to our transfer points, leaving the huffing, puffing, sleep-deprived *hoi polloi* of economy in our wake.

While most people amble toward security, I'm off to the Virgin Clubhouse, a year-old, \$22 million, 27,000-square-foot facility that's more like a private club than a lounge. Among its many amenities are a Bumble and Bumble salon, a spa, a game room, a rooftop garden, and a sit-down restaurant.

I check in at the Cowshed spa, arrange for a haircut and a shave (including a shoulder and neck massage and the application of many good-smelling products, some of which tingle) and book a private shower room. If there's time I'll steam in the sauna and have some bubbly in the hot tub. Forty-five minutes later I'm a new man, but they're calling my flight over the PA. No time for the hot tub or a game of pool, and I head for the door feeling let down. What Virgin's done here is pretty remarkable. They have created something that actually makes me want to hang out at the airport. I am famous among my friends for allowing the minimum amount of time possible to get to airports, but I can actually imagine leaving hours earlier than normal if I had this place to look forward to.

The genius of Virgin has always been its charming idiosyncrasies. There's no first or business class but rather an Upper

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Class separated from the economy cabin by a small bar complete with barstools. It's unfair to compare the service with the level of luxury at Jet or Singapore, but neither of those airlines will pick you up on a motorcycle, as Virgin will for Upper Class passengers in London, who also enjoy drive-up check-in, where you can literally check in from your car. Nor do they have an in-flight spa therapist.



That would be Kelly, a cute blonde who appears at my seat with a clipboard and a question: "Mr. Dean, would you like a treatment during the flight?" Virgin offers four options, at no cost, to Upper Classmen. I opt for the neck and shoulder rub.

A massage isn't a bad way to wrap up a vacation this bizarre. I don't suppose I've earned it in the traditional sense—

I have probably exercised fewer muscles over the past 60-some hours than in any similar period since I last sprained my ankle and was couch-bound for a week.

I settle into my seat and accept some Champagne from Estelle, another of the army of bleached blondes in red skirts who roam the aisles of the Airbus. She walks me through the seat controls,

discusses the evening's menu, and explains the entertainment system, which I soon use to lull myself back to sleep. Estelle's chirpy falsetto is also the first thing I hear as I wake to the rumble of the jet descending into New York.

"Can I get anything else for you before we land, Mr. Dean?"

Sure, why not, I answer back. One last hot towel for the road? ■

BUSINESS CLASS

It feels almost like first class on the 90-seat planes that nine-month-old business-class airline **L'Avion** flies between New York and Paris. The menu is superb—baked red mullet, cèpe risotto, lamb medallions with ginger, and various cheeses are among the items routinely served—as are the French wines selected by oenologist Frank Lucet. Meanwhile, **Cathay Pacific's** business class is nipping at the heels of its superb first-class service—in fact, the cabin's new seats, which transform into both massage chairs and full flatbeds, are even better than some of the airline's older first-class models.

ALMOST-PRIVATE SERVICE

Traveling via private jet is undoubtedly cushier than flying commercial, but some airlines are closing that gap. On routes to and from Munich, Frankfurt, and Russia, **Lufthansa** uses Cessna or Bravo jets that fit no more than seven passengers, each of whom get individualized menus; a limo to and from the plane; and swift immigration, security, and custom checks. (Plus tickets can be booked as little as 24 hours in advance.) **Austrian Airlines'** new Business Jet service to and from Vienna within Europe offers exclusive transfers to your connecting flight and customized planning that minimizes delays.

NYC-LONDON OVERNIGHT

British Airways is still at the top of this game: It offers a wide range of departure times (usually at least five daily from New York) and new cabins, which were done in collaboration with Tyler Brûlé's design firm, Winkreative, and include wider Z-shaped flatbeds that are shielded by glass privacy screens. **EOS**—an all-business-class carrier that flies this route exclusively (it uses London's Stansted airport)—provides curbside escort service and has just 48 seats, each with 21 square feet of space. It's also heralded as the most punctual option, with an average delay of just 18 minutes for its twice-daily weekday flights.

U.S. SERVICE

United States-based airlines too often don't compare favorably with their international counterparts, but there are ways to fly luxuriously within the 50 states. **JetBlue's** roomy leather seats and individual TVs are impressive, especially considering the incredibly low ticket prices (buy two adjacent tickets and *voilà!* your own first class seat!), and **United** offers flatbeds in first-class from New York to Los Angeles and San Francisco. **Continental Airlines** is our absolute favorite, scoring with its BusinessFirst service to Hawaii featuring deep reclining seats and surprisingly gourmet meal options.