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Emirate's Superluxe Airbus A380 Makes Flying Fun Again. If You're Loaded

By Chuck Squatriglia



SAN FRANCISCO -- The world's biggest jetliner brings back the golden era of air travel, when flying was an event so grand [men wore ties](#) and women wore furs. That is, it will bring it back if you've got \$14,000.

That kind of cash buys a first-class ticket for a New York-Dubai round trip on Emirates airline's new A380, a 489-seat behemoth where the 14 people rich enough to sit in first class [enjoy hot showers](#), massaging chairs, 1,000 channels and seven-course meals served on china and linen. Oh -- there's also a bar with a waterfall.

If you're like the rest of us and have just \$1,500, you get a seat sandwiched between nine other people, a 9-inch TV screen and space in an overhead bin. But the seat's comfy, there are 500 channels, and the cup holder's gyroscopic.

Dubai-based Emirates is adding 58 A380 super-jumbo jets to its fleet as fast as Airbus can build them. It [picked up the first one last week](#) and made the [maiden voyage from Dubai](#) to New York on Friday. Emirates is adding service from Dubai to San Francisco and Los Angeles by the end of the year, and even though it's using the more conventional Boeing 777-200 on those runs, it brought the A380 to San Francisco Monday to show people how the other half lives.

Huge doesn't begin to describe the A380. It's 238 feet long, it weighs 560 tons and it carries 82,000 gallons of fuel. The airline says the plane burns just 3.1 liters of fuel per passenger per 100 kilometers (a little more than three quarts of fuel per passenger every 60 miles), a figure it boasts is "better than most hybrid passenger cars."

Just how big is it? The KLM Boeing 747 next to it looked dinky, and the American Airlines Airbus A300 that taxied past looked like a Smart car alongside a Hummer. Despite its size, the A380 is said to be quite nimble, very fast and a dream to fly.

"It's like [driving a Ferrari](#)," says Abbas Shaban, chief pilot for Airbus and captain of the three flights the plane's made since Emirates picked it up last week. He's been flying commercial jets for 28 years and says the A380 "is much better than any plane I've flown. It's more responsive, more powerful and more stable."

It's also more ostentatiously over the top than anything in the sky. If Steve Wynn built airplanes instead of [Vegas casinos](#), they'd look like the Emirates A380. First-class passengers sit in leather seats that fold flat at the push of a button. They watch first-run movies on 23-inch flatscreens. Their private suites -- seats are *so* plebeian -- are trimmed in polished wood and brass. There are two showers with faux marble floors, fluffy towels and the biggest assortment of shampoo this side of a Beverly Hills salon. (With just 50 gallons of water for 14 people, you're limited to five minutes.) Lighting that mimics sunrise and sunset is said to keep your internal clock in sync and minimize jet lag.

One of the 76 business class seats will set you back \$9,000. They're almost as swanky as those up front, but you don't get the showers, the TVs are a little smaller and there's no waterfall -- but there is a well-stocked bar that'll seat 25 people and apparently was hopping on the flight from Dubai. Even the 399 seats in economy class -- which, at \$1,500 a person round-trip, is a bit of a misnomer -- is nicer than anything you've flown recently. The cloth seats are wide and supportive, the entertainment system offers so many choices it's overwhelming. and your meal doesn't come in a box.

Emirates is flying the A380 only on its Dubai to JFK route, but it's got two more planes on the way for its Dubai to London and Sydney-Auckland runs. It has \$18.8 billion worth of A380s in

the pipeline and may bring them to other U.S. cities in the future. All those planes will add more than 25,000 seats to the airline's fleet, which makes you wonder who's going to fill them.

Emirates isn't worried. The airline's grown by 20 percent annually since it was founded in 1985 (and, according to Senior VP Nigel Page, done it without any government subsidies). With air travel expected to triple in the next two decades and landing rights at airports getting tougher to secure, airlines need to pack as many people into every flight as possible. Adel Al Redha, executive vice president of engineering and operations, said the demand is there. "The only thing holding us back is the planes," he says. "We can't get them fast enough."

Photo gallery by Emily Lang / Wired.com



First-class suites feature 23-inch TVs and 1,000 channels of entertainment that cover everything from *Futurama* and first-run movies to 17 hours of symphony concerts and every album Pink Floyd ever recorded. The suites feature wood and brass appointments, fresh-cut flowers and leather seats that stretch out into beds. Seven-course meals are served whenever you want -- just call your flight attendant -- and served on real china and linen. Call before your flight, and you can choose from one of 23 menus to suit every dietary and religious consideration.



Things are a little more conventional in economy, but you still get your own TV and 500 channels of entertainment. The seats are actually comfortable and recline nicely, allowing you to stretch out a bit. One of the coolest features has to be the gyroscopic cup holders that keep your drink level at all times. Sweet.



Passengers who shell out \$14,000 for a first-class ticket can freshen up after their 14-hour flight from Dubai to JFK in one of two showers. The "spa," as the airline calls it, is bigger than some Manhattan studio apartments. There's only 50 gallons of water aboard, so everyone's limited to 5 minutes. An alarm warns you when time's almost up so you can get the last of the shampoo out of your hair.



Every passenger gets a three-in-one phone, remote and videogame controller to choose from hundreds of movies, TV shows, CDs, audio books and videogames, or place satellite-phone calls at \$5 a minute! You can even send text messages. If none of that floats your boat, cameras mounted in the nose, under the fuselage and in the tail of the plane let you watch the scenery go by. It's oddly hypnotic, especially during takeoff.



The Emirates Airbus A380 rolls toward the terminal at San Francisco International Airport after flying in from New York. The plan was for the water cannons to shoot over the plane, but with a tail 85 feet tall and a wingspan of almost 262 feet, they couldn't quite make it.