

Concorde Recollections

It's a bright, spring afternoon in St. James's, London, 1995. I finish a meeting, grab my briefcase and travel bag, race out to Piccadilly, hail a black cab and ask the driver to take me to London Heathrow, Terminal 4. A brisk walk from the taxi and I am at the British Airways business class desk. After a brief exchange of pleasantries with a smiling member of the ground staff, I watch with great expectation as she enters a few keystrokes. Will it happen or not? And then she looks up from her computer with a broad smile and says, "Would you like to be upgraded, sir?" I want to shout, "Yahoo! You betcha!", but instead I manage a modicum of mid-Atlantic calm and just say, "Yes, please, that would be delightful." She hands me a new ticket, and there it is, in smudgy red ink on thermal ticket paper, "BA1", the flight designator for the Concorde from London to New York.

During the mid 1990s I flew back and forth between London to New York roughly twice a month and had the good fortune of flying the Concorde many times. Each occasion was an exercise in speed, technology, beautiful design, elegance, and fascinating social interaction. Nothing in current aviation, not even private aircraft, can compare with the Concorde experience at its best.

The Concorde may be the last great technology project to have been designed with paper, pencil, and slide rule rather than computer design software. Like a vintage Ferrari or Aston Martin of the same period, the Concorde was made to be beautiful as well as fast, and the aspect of beauty came first for its British and French designers. With its sharp pointed nose, sleek fuselage and swept back wings that extended to the tail of the aircraft, it looked like nothing else in commercial aviation. The engines were an integral part of the wing design, unlike modern commercial aircraft where the separate engine housings hang from pylons on the wings. In the aft edge of the Concorde wings were a series of rectangular engine exhaust vents that reminded me of the pipes on a 1980s American muscle car. There was a strong human element in the design of the Concorde; that idiosyncratic sense of beauty that could only come from iterations of drawing by hand.

There was also a strong human element in the operation of the aircraft. The Concorde flew in the era before fly-by-wire and automatic takeoffs and landings. All the controls were hydraulic rather than electronic. Takeoffs and landings were an exercise in great piloting skill, more like a Navy pilot coming in for a carrier landing than a modern 737 coming into LaGuardia. Concorde pilots and crew were among the most senior members of British Airways staff, and it was always a pleasure to see gray hair, sharp uniforms and old school, courteous smiles and manners on entering the aircraft. Many of the staff were trained on the plane at the time of its introduction in the 1970s and continued in the same roles for twenty years or more because of their love of the job, the plane, and their unique set of skills in operating a supersonic aircraft.

Like all great designs, the Concorde had its quirks and outright flaws. On takeoff, passengers would feel forcibly pushed back into the seats and the takeoff angle was much steeper than a regular plane. The sharp pointed nose of the plane was articulated so that it could be pointed down in ascent, allowing the pilot vision of what was ahead. And takeoffs were a rather smelly affair. On every takeoff, the cabin would fill with the nauseating smell of jet fuel. It had something to do with the design of the

engines being built directly into the wing. Whenever I asked a crew member about this, I was told that it was perfectly safe and happened every time.

The Concorde was all about speed, and, to this day, it was the fastest and the highest that a commercial passenger could fly. The coveted BA1 flight left London at 7 in the evening and arrived in New York at 5:30 PM. It felt as though you had arrived before you had left. The flight times could have been even less than the scheduled three and a half hours but for rules on both sides of the Atlantic to minimize the sonic boom over land. Flying from New York to London, the plane would fly at subsonic speeds until it passed Nantucket Island, the pilot would then hit the afterburners and the sonic boom would sound over the New Bedford fisherman working the Atlantic trench. Inside the plane cabin, on the front bulkhead was a digital display with two orange numbers. It looked like the kind of display that you would see in a delicatessen to tell you what place you are in line. The two numbers displayed the speed of the plane in Mach terms, usually peaking around 2.1 Mach, more than twice the speed of sound.

Once the Concorde reached maximum speed and altitude, the heat from the air friction on the plane was so great that the fuselage expanded by about a foot in length. Because of this heat, the windows were tiny, about the size of a 3 x 5 file card. Mid-flight and at full speed, the window became hot to the touch. It was like sitting next to a 100-watt light bulb with no shade. But the view out of that tiny window was the greatest in the world. When the Concorde reached its maximum altitude of between 50,000 and 60,000 feet, the curvature of the earth was plainly visible.

Boarding the Concorde felt like entering an exclusive private club in tight quarters. The plane only held 92 passengers seated in rows of four. The interior of the plane was very small and even a short adult needed to duck to make it through the door. To provide a greater sense of space, the seats were low to the floor of the plane and with low backs, more like club chairs in a lounge rather than the usual airline seats. The close quarters, low seats and lack of digital entertainment encouraged social interaction among the passengers. And it was always a fascinating group. The BA1 flight manifest would include titans of fashion and finance, entertainment and business, racing to New York for a dinner on Park Avenue or home in the Hamptons.

On one Concorde flight, I was seated next to a well-known opera singer. I was reading the *Economist* as he took his seat, and he was featured in the current Rolex ad in the magazine. To start a conversation, I remarked that he looked much better in real life than in the ad and we then had a discussion of the state of opera in America. After dinner, he asked me if I would mind if he worked through his score for an upcoming performance. In a barely audible *sotto voce*, he sang the entire baritone role of Massenet's *Thais*. I had my own private recital from one of the world's great opera singers while flying at Mach 2 and 57,000 feet.

On another flight, a colleague took his aisle seat and found that his companion in the window seat next to him was a well-known 90s supermodel. I watched them exchange pleasantries over the glasses of champagne that were brought around before the plane embarked. My friend took his champagne straight; the supermodel had hers with a large sleeping pill. Midway through the flight I looked over and the model was in a deep slumber and had tipped over with her head on my colleague's shoulder and her long auburn

hair cascading over his shirt and Hermes tie. Unfortunately, this was before the era of ubiquitous phones with cameras.

Near the end of every flight, the stewards would distribute a Concorde themed gift to the passengers. It might be a diary or portfolio bound in the same buttery soft, light gray leather used in the Concorde seats. I still have quite a few of these; some in the original plastic wrapping. I'm sure that there are collectors for this sort of memorabilia and my mementoes might fetch a rather good price on Ebay. But I'm not even tempted to look. I wouldn't want to part with any of the memories.