

# The First to Fly Club

by Chris Sloan



KOK CHWEE SIM

As the webmaster of Airarchive.com, the world's largest 'webseum' of commercial aviation, I am a passionate—some might say crazy—collector of all things related to the industry. As they say, 'I am not alone in my addiction'. There are collectors of timetables, safety cards, postcards, memorabilia, luggage tags, meal service items, airline menus, cabin crew uniforms, playing cards, frequent flyer miles—well, the list can go on like a delay on a summer's day at Atlanta-Hartsfield. Some of the more financially endowed, such as John Travolta, even collect actual airliners (*Airways*, October & September 2002).

When I was fortunate to be a passenger on the maiden commercial service of the Airbus A380-800, Singapore Airlines SQ380, in October 2007 (*Airways*, January 2008), I knew I was flying in rarefied air, but little did I know to what extent. On that flight, I would be introduced to a very well-travelled group of collectors—the 'First to Fly Club'. You might ask, who are these people and what do they collect? I suppose you could make the argument that the first members of this fraternity were two brothers by the name of Orville and Wilbur Wright. After their 1903 accomplishment, few others could lay claim to being a founding member of such an exclusive club.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the First to Fly Club, however, counts a loose confederation of 25 or so members. They live around the world: Australia, Singapore, Canary Islands, Bangkok, New York, Arizona, Florida, Monaco, Switzerland, and Italy. Among their ranks are travel agents, a manager in the steel industry, a 16-year-old student, a television producer, software programmers, businessmen, a medical imaging technologist (radiographer), even a few people who work in the airline industry. Their goal is to fly on the first scheduled flight of significant airline services. With new flights being introduced every day, it isn't feasible to sample every inaugural offering. These individuals are not to be confused with the 'hyper miles



The club in action: the members of First To Fly that went on the inaugural A380 flight to London.



Isabelle Chu onboard Singapore Airlines Flight SQ380 on October 25, 2007, en route from Singapore to Sydney, displays some of her first flight certificates.

flyers', or 'mileage junkies' (*Airways*, May 2009), who fly specifically to accumulate frequent flyer miles. These are true airline 'passionados', although the extra miles they accrue are a bonus.

According to Ian Goodwin—a radiographer from Australia, who is the *de facto* leader and webmaster for the group—"We are a group of dedicated aviation enthusiasts who just can't resist being aboard a big 'plane when it's making history. We have now evolved into a core group of dedicated 'nutters', with a loose headcount of around twenty, for whom new commercial aviation frontiers are an irresistible attraction!"

Thus far, the club has focused on first flights of the Airbus A380: Singapore to Sydney, Tokyo, London, and Paris; Emirates from Dubai to New York; Qantas from Melbourne to LAX; and, just to keep things from becoming too predictable, Singapore's first Airbus A330 flight to Brisbane.

According to Goodwin, the genesis of the First to Fly Club was Flyertalk.net and the inaugural flight of the Singapore Airlines (SIA) A340-500. "It all started when SIA made history when it introduced the world's longest commercial flight from Singapore to Los Angeles [*Airways*, June 2004]. Not satisfied with that SIA then bettered it with an even longer flight, from Singapore to New York, over the North Pole [*Airways*, October 2004]. The latter's flight time was nearly 19 hours nonstop."

Unofficially, a few of the members—Isabelle Chu, Ike Chittock, and Keith George of Australia—were the charter members on those inaugurals. The group really came of age on the SIA A380 inaugural. Says Nathan Fruchter, an

PHOTOS: IOK CHWEE SIN

executive in the steel industry from New York: "On this flight, the party atmosphere lent itself to meeting other aviation buffs and before I knew it, I met Ian Goodwin, Mark Hindle, and somehow this group came together. Within a few days Ian took charge and we soon had a website. I made new friends from all corners of the world who share the same passion for commercial aviation. All of a sudden I wasn't that lonely nut. It felt great."

'F2F' members exchange daily emails about their next conquest, boast two websites ([www.firsttofly.net](http://www.firsttofly.net) and [www.sq380.net](http://www.sq380.net)), and even have their own commemorative shirts and caps made for flights, courtesy of Garry Burrows of Bangkok. Fruchter even has a New York automobile 'vanity' license: 'SQ A380'. Officially, the club has made eight roundtrips, including a reunion anniversary flight of the inaugural A380. They organize celebratory soirées before and after each venture, such as the obligatory high tea at Singapore's Raffles Hotel. The most notorious event occurred in Sydney after the A380 inauguration when Tim Spahr decapitated a model of a Boeing 747 with a hacksaw, and in horror B-movie style, sprayed ketchup on the wooden carcass of the ex-'queen of the skies'.



Another club member onboard 9V-SKA on October 25, 2007, was Thomas Lee. When SIA learned that he was a passenger on the inaugural Pan American Boeing 747 service it requested his Pan Am certificate and framed it together with the certificate commemorating Lee's latest aviation accomplishment.



At the A380 first service reunion of the First to Fly Club at the Raffles Hotel in Singapore on October 25, 2008, Capt Ting presented a photograph to Ian Goodwin of a Singapore Airlines A380 signed by all those present.

Isabelle Chu of Perth, Western Australia, is considered the 'worst offender' of the group, with a certificate collection of ten. Thomas Marks Lee of Coto de Caza, California, who has helped design airplane systems, such as the trash compactor and the vacuum toilet waste system and water system for the A380, is considered the most distinguished of the group, having flown on both the first service of the Boeing 747 and the A380. He carries his certificates and clippings from both flights to satisfy the curious (and envious).

The youngest member, 16-year-old Anmol Gupta of Singapore, was barely able to join this exclusive club: "When the date was released for the first A380 flight I was devastated because I had my final math GCSE exam shortly afterward and I thought my parents would never allow me to go. But my father managed to get two tickets on the outbound service. A week later he told me something I won't forget for a long time, 'Anmol, we are now on the return flight as well.'"

Some of the membership is posh, while others are, well, plush. Ian Goodwin explains: "We have two stuffed-toy travel mascots who absolutely must travel with us. I have 'Mr Whisky' the cat, while Miguel Soria from Gran Canaria [Canary Islands] brings 'Karl the Coyote' every time."

Even Captain Robert Ting, who commanded the history-making A380 inaugural, has become an honorary member, showing up at the reunion event in Singapore.

What drives these 'nutters', as Goodwin affectionately refers to them? Nicolas Dirac, an IT (information technology) supporter from Basel [Basle], Switzerland, offers a touching response: "I feel bored often in my life. If you do always the same day by day, that can't be living. I searched for something crazy. I can't do so many active things, like sports or jumping from a 'plane, because I had an operation on my back. But this I can do, and I love flying because there in the sky, I feel free."

Software developer Michael Dodd of Seoul, South Korea, has another reason for being infected with the first



Mascot Karl the Coyote enjoys the view.



Some of Michael Dodd's commemorative first flight postal covers, signed by the crews.

flight bug: "One of my hobbies is stamp collecting—more specifically, aerophilately—and since I believe the A380 marks a new era I wanted to create my own first flight covers and combine my aviation and philatelic interests. I thought I could create something that would be close to unique—my own designed covers, flown by me with certified proof they were flown and, if I was lucky, enough signed by the crew. There are many people who create 'souvenir' envelopes. I wanted to do something more special, in keeping with a long tradition of first flight covers in aerophilately. My first cover commemorated the first landing of an A380 at Sydney's Kingsford Smith Airport. I have produced covers for every inaugural. I sold the cover as promised on eBay and gave the total winning bid (\$600) to Doctors without Borders."

One question that comes up often is, "How many miles collectively have you flown?" Goodwin brushes it away, "I'd need a slide rule to give you an accurate answer, especially when you consider the various feeder flights we all take to get us all to our intended point of departure." Another question concerns which class these first flight fanatics fly. Given everyone's different backgrounds, the answer is uplifting. "Some of us go first class every time, some go business, and some go economy. There is no 'class

distinction' among the group though. Our passion for aviation is what brings us together."

Where to next? The Holy Grail awaits these intrepid explorers: ANA's (All Nippon Airways's) inaugural Boeing 787 Dreamliner service. Had things gone according to plan, it would have left from Tokyo's Narita Airport sometime in May 2008. As we now know, that piece of 'composite' flying history has been delayed until at least the second quarter of 2010, heightening the anticipation. At the rate Boeing is going, the First To Fly gang may be 'the first to fly to space' aboard Virgin Galactic. Sir Richard Branson, are you listening? →

## FIRST TO FLY TRIPS

| Airline   | Type | Sectors      | Date                  |
|-----------|------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Singapore | A380 | SIN-SYD-SIN  | October 25/26, 2007   |
| Singapore | A380 | SIN-LHR-SIN  | March 18/19, 2008     |
| Singapore | A380 | SIN-NRT*-SIN | May 20/21, 2008       |
| Emirates  | A380 | DXB-JFK-DXB  | August 1/2, 2008      |
| Qantas    | A380 | MEL-LAX-MEL  | October 20/21, 2008   |
| Singapore | A380 | SIN-SYD-SIN  | October 25/26, 2008** |
| Singapore | A330 | SIN-BNE-SIN  | March 30/31, 2009     |
| Singapore | A380 | SIN-CDG-SIN  | June 1/2, 2009        |

\*diversion to Nagoya

\*\*1<sup>st</sup> A380 anniversary flight