

InFlight

AIRLINE NEWS

EDITED BY BELINDA JACKSON

THAI AIRLINES' SAMRAB
THAI SET MENU

Taste of the Tropics

Tigerair & Airnorth launch flights to Townsville

Sleepy **Townsville** is firmly on travellers' radar at the moment with the news that budget airline Tigerair zips into town on a new Melbourne-Townsville route starting June 22. The gateway to Magnetic Island and the **Great Barrier Reef** is hot property right now – regional airline Airnorth is also making a beeline north, with flights from Brisbane West Wellcamp airport up to Townsville from May 8. Seekers of Vietnam's famous sunsets and seafood can now score a deal with the launch of Jetstar's new routes from Melbourne or Sydney into **Ho Chi Minh**

City (HCMC). Jetstar will fly Boeing 787 Dreamliners three times weekly from Melbourne to the Vietnamese capital from May 10, with four flights a week from Sydney from May 11. The airline is no stranger to the country: its offspring, Jetstar Pacific, is based in HCMC and jointly owned by Jetstar's owner, Qantas, and rival **Vietnam Airlines**. Vietnam saw a 26 percent increase in international visitors in 2016, with more than 10 million arrivals. On the flip side, Jetstar says Australia's seen a 21 percent rise in visitors from Vietnam. Fares, starting at \$349, include 7kg carry-on luggage. Meanwhile, behind the iron curtain of Business and First Class, **Thai Airlines** is ramping up its offerings, embracing its 'Thainess' (sic) with its new offering of Samrab Thai, a Thai set menu presented with the aplomb of a five-star hotel. Now available on all business class seats flying between Australia and Thailand, the menu marries the four pillars of **Thai cuisine** – spicy, sour, bitter or sweet – with dishes such as Tamarind Thai beef salad or prawn chook chee. Wary of the spice? Western menus are still available, should you need a trout herb salad, or grab a steak sandwich from the all-day dining menu and call for the Veuve Clicquot (or a single-origin Thai coffee). The airline has 39 flights a week from Australia.



Photo: Tourism and Events Queensland



Qatar's new A380 QSuites

Qantas vs Qatar

We're flying more than ever, with routes across the world growing daily, but airlines know the real money is found when passengers turn left – into First, Business and the fast-growing Premium Economy classes, so it's no wonder they're **chasing the non-economy dollar**. Qantas recently revealed the Premium Economy seats that will debut in its new Boeing 787-9 Dreamliners from October. The wider seat will have more storage compartments, two USB charging points, AC power and bigger high-def TV screens – just the ticket on those ultra-long-haul flights. Meanwhile, rival Qatar has unwrapped its new **A380 business class QSuites**, featuring double beds and adjustable panels to create a private room for well-heeled families on the move, or (less excitingly) a small flying boardroom. The QSuites will be on show when the airline starts its A380 daily service to Melbourne on June 30. qatarairways.com, visitqatar.qa





HAPPY VIBES & WIFI
ABOARD SCOOT



Unleash the beast: future of inflight internet

Those of us beleaguered with internet that requires feeding peanuts to the monkey in the wheel may or may not be impressed to learn that Qantas domestic flights will be able to

tap into Australia's super-speed internet carrier, the nbn, ahead of much of the country. Our national carrier has been slow to the internet party – **low-cost carrier Scoot**, a budget offshoot of Singapore Airlines which flies from four Australian cities, has been hooking us up in the air on all its 787 Dreamliners for the past few years, with prices from \$US5 for 20MB, up to \$US21.95 for 24 hours (you can use it on a range of flights) with no data limits. Qantas, however, is quick to note that its new service will be a nippy affair, with speeds 10 times its rivals' so it can support the bonus **Foxtel and Netflix** services it offers its customers inflight, falling in line with the expectations of US travellers. Even more exciting, the Qantas offering, when it comes, will be free. Qantas is the **first domestic carrier** to offer inflight internet – whether you like it or not. Virgin Australia is coy on dates, but says it'll offer inflight wifi in the next couple of months, while our near neighbour's carrier Air New Zealand is looking at the second half of 2017, with trans-Tasman flights the first cabs off the rank. Now all you have to do is prepare yourself for the inevitable onslaught of that most obvious conversation opener: 'I'm on the plaaaaane.'

3 of the best: Inflight Gear



TOP TOTE

Join the adoring cult that follows State of Escape's clever carryalls. Made from neoprene with soft, sturdy sailing rope handles, the new release Cityscape MII slips easily from poolside to sidewalk in three new, city-smart monochrome options – black with black rope handles, and black or white body with black-and-white rope handles. Chic and capacious, it carries 27 litres and will curl companionably at your feet, with all your inflight essentials. Designed and made in Australia, it's dust and waterproof, with large side pockets so not all is lost inside, and happily handles washing machines for a post-travel spruce-up – \$339. stateofescape.com



REDEYE SPECIAL

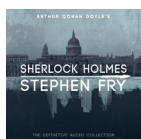
Stash your luggage in the cargo section, not under your eyes. These under-eye patches from Texan company Nerium are made from cooling seaweed and pea, and infused with aloe leaf juice and mushroom extract, which hydrate tired eyes. Hardened glamazons will think nothing of patting the patches on mid-flight and accessorising with a pair of headphones. Let's face it, what else are you going to do with your time? So the bright eyes are sorted – the bushy tail is up to you. Eye-V Moisture Boost Hydrogel Patches (five sets per pack), \$85. neriumaus.com.au



SALVE SAVIOUR

Save the day, and any skin scrapes with the new mini-tube of Saviour Balm, the signature offering from Kiwi skincare group Antipodes. The key ingredient is our own tea tree flower, which lends its properties to the anti-bacterial, anti-fungal and anti-microbiological salve, making it suitable for the scrapes and bangs suffered during inflight wars for the armrest. As an aside, it also helps ease chapped lips, sunburnt skin and even holds rogue eyebrows in place. Saviour Balm Mini, \$19.90. theantipodesnature.com

Audiobooks at Altitude



Sherlock Holmes: The Definitive Collection
Written by Arthur Conan Doyle, narrated by Stephen Fry. No introduction needed for Holmes, Fry or Doyle – the trio is perfectly matched, like bacon, eggs and toast. Holmes delves into Victorian London's dark underbelly in the nearly 72 hours of this audiobook, solving mysteries with his razor-sharp mind. \$110.43, audible.com



Lion: A Long Way Home

Written by Saroo Brierley, narrated by Vikas Adam. Hot on the heels of the successful film that links Hobart, Tasmania and India's Madhya Pradesh in a tale of survival and determination. Warning: plenty of studies show we're far more likely to cry at altitude, so pack the tissues. \$50.51, audible.com

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AIRLINE NEWS

Going For Glory

Long-Distance Airline Wars

Plane buffs know it's the most coveted prize in the business: who's got the world's longest flight? The award is based on either distance or time in the air, and **Qatar Airways** recently scored a time-based win with its new Doha-Auckland route, which took a **backside-numbing 17:20** hours on the return leg to cover 14,535km. Just as well the Middle Eastern carrier recently refreshed its Oryx One entertainment system to offer more than 3000 movies, games, music and kids' options. The next challenger to the throne is Qantas' Perth-London non-stop flights, which kick off in March 2018. Tickets are now on sale for the 14,498km flight, which is expected to take about 17 hours for its Dreamliners. This first direct service between **Australia and Europe** skips the charms of the Middle East and the traditional Asian stopover cities of Hong Kong and Singapore. Singapore Airlines isn't taking it lying down; it aims to smash all comers when it relaunches its non-stop Singapore to New York route, this time on the new A350, covering 15,300km in 18 to 19 hours. However, Geoffrey Thomas, editor-in-chief of airlinesratings.com, says



DOHA, QATAR

the next big thing is Boeing's 777X, bigger than the current aircraft and with most of the 787's features. 'It'll run **Sydney to New York** with a full payload, and Sydney to London non-stop,' he says. Before you pull out your credit cards, we'll be waiting till 2020 for that one. As he notes, the mantle for the longest flight seems to change four or five times a year. 'It's a strategic thing, and it's also for the glory.'



SINGAPORE AIRLINES
NEW A350-900XWB



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Best & Worst Airline Food

Smother it with sauce, serve it with shiraz, pass the salt: it's a case of reheat and repeat down the back of the plane

WORDS **BELINDA JACKSON**

A lifetime ago, I was flying across Russia's Caucasus mountains on a route that no longer exists, on an airline that has since gone out of business. There were, perhaps, a dozen of us on the creaking, leaking Russian-owned plane from Vladikavkaz to Sochi. The cabin crew paused only in their cosmetics application to curl hot-pink lips into a snarl and deliver water and a dry cracker on request.

Save the low passenger numbers, you could well mistake that flaccid food service for any domestic economy Australian flight, where grey-suited businessmen and toddlers alike are to be found morosely gumming perky, Smartie-covered cookies thanks to the miserly accountants on their cost-cutting committees. Unless, of course, you're up at the hush-hush, wrap-me-in-cotton-wool, pointy end of the plane.

It's a far cry from the Golden Age of Travel, where brightly coloured vintage postcards show white-clad chefs whipping cloches away to reveal platters of beautiful, freshly prepared food, although I'm imagining a fair bit of aspic going on there, with the special ambience that only menthol cigarette smoke can bring.

Admittedly, we no longer have to sell a kidney to fly across the world, and when we do fly, it's a whole lot faster. What's also changed since the 1950s (apart from the advent of crevice-hugging sportswear as the preferred wardrobe option) is the science of eating at 30,000 feet. German carrier Lufthansa discovered a third of our tastebuds pack their bags the minute the doors close and the cabin crew start sashaying toward the emergency exits.

One-third. Who doesn't love an easy statistic? Even I can remember that. Add to that a high-altitude blocked nose and it's an incentive for fashionable fasting or an excuse to hit the bottle, remembering that one on the ground is two in the air. Airline chefs have taken the research on board and run with it: smother it with sauce, serve it with shiraz, pass the salt.

Some national carriers, who naturally showcase their countries' signature dishes, didn't need the research. Bhutan, whose own Drukair is the only

airline to fly into the tiny Himalayan nation, uses chillies as its main vegetable, and salt as its preferred seasoning. Meat or other vegetables make the odd, cameo performance. Druk didn't need the memo about serving inflight food hot and strong. Its main course, ema datse (chilli with cheese), served up with a foil-sealed cup of sticky reconstituted orange juice, is still burnt into my gut lining as a memorable dish, and not necessarily for the right reasons. 'You don't go to Bhutan for the food,' old Bhutan hands warned me, and they were right.

Yet other countries that really should know better still choose to massacre their national cuisine in the name of 'airline food'. Languid salads, malnourished noodles married with sedated, deflated

'THE MAIN COURSE IS STILL BURNT INTO MY GUT LINING'

chicken and the old powdered-eggs-and-potato combo have long been the cattle class go-to from even the world's top carriers. When in doubt, the Middle Eastern carriers just add sugar. I know, up the front, they're pulling out the Bollinger, the air chefs are rattling the sauté pans and I can smell the espresso machine working, but the travesties are happening past the iron curtain, back in economy.

There are, of course, the shining stars who pop up in the most unexpected places. What dark magic does Turkish Airlines weave to deliver its delicious, distinctive cuisine – toothsome kebabs, spry salads, hot flat bread and potable juice? A little kebab stand hidden in the galley? It's no wonder the airline is a constant at the top of the airline food awards lists. This year it hit six consecutive years as Skytrax' Best Airline in Europe.



Heston Blumenthal stepped into British Airways' galleys, brandishing nasal douching devices to invigorate fliers' sense of smell; however we don't expect his Meat Fruit will be served any time soon.

It even wooed Kevin Costner and, more recently, Morgan Freeman to star in its ads, in one of the more unexpected cases of 'celebrities-making-a-quick-buck-overseas-while-America's-not-looking'. But the most sensitive men in Hollywood obviously know what side their unleavened bread is buttered on.

Airlines have begged celebrity chefs to discover the secret. Virgin Australia has Luke Mangan, Joël Robuchon works with Air France; even Heston Blumenthal has stepped into British Airways' galleys, brandishing nasal douching devices to reinvigorate fliers' sense of smell. Have they made a difference? The seared steaks, the perfectly poached salmon, the purées and petits fours are going down well in the big end of town, where the corporates, the cashed-up and points players sit.

If economy travellers are lucky, some of that celebrity magic may even trickle down the aisles, albeit with only two choices ('chicken or the veg?'). Otherwise, they all seem to subscribe to the theory that economy travellers' tastebuds are already on the beach with a tinned piña colada by the time they hit cruising altitude.

But when it comes down to it, deep down in our dark hearts we know the low-cost airlines have got it right when they say that they'll get us (and hopefully our luggage) there on time, and safely. The rest is just trimmings. Pass the cup of water, would you?