

'Feline' Good with EVA and Hello Kitty

by Ken Donohue

Many airlines around the world take delight in introducing unique color schemes on their aircraft. Some do it to mark historical anniversaries, others to promote special events, and others still offer up their airframes as flying billboards in search of incremental revenue. But Taiwan's EVA Airways has gone one step further. Not only does it have five Airbus A330 twin-jets adorned in 'Hello Kitty' liveries, the airline has taken the theme-based on the Japanese bobtail cat cartoon character—and successfully incorporated it in the entire passenger experience. So much so that Hello Kitty services now cover seven destinations, comprising three in Japan (Sapporo, Fukuoka, and Tokyo), and Seoul, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Guam.



EVA Air's first adoption of Hello Kitty was in 2005, and eventually three A330-200s were used on routes to Japan. The promotion ended in 2008, with the expiration of a contract with Sanrio, the Japanese company that markets Hello Kitty.

"The idea is simple," says Austin Cheng, EVA's executive VP project division. "We believe that travel and flying should be fun. We believe Hello Kitty is the best character to offer this kind of fun for our passengers. It's not just a fancy livery. It's about creating a special experience for our passengers."

Feedback was positive, so the airline worked with Sanrio to re-launch the Hello Kitty experience. It was during EVA's 20th anniversary in October 2011 that the first of the second-generation Hello Kitty A330s took to the skies on the Taipei-Sapporo route. But it's not only the outside of the aircraft that sports the special character; there are more than 100 Hello Kitty in-flight service items that enhance the product's popularity. This includes themed pillows, specially boxed meals for economy class passengers, soap dispensers, and even Hello Kitty toilet paper in the lavatory. "The airline industry is very competitive, and so it's important to stand out and offer a unique experience," explains Cheng. "The response has been very favorable, not just in Asia, but in markets beyond, and so we are planning to introduce a sixth Hello Kitty Jet with one of our Boeing 777-300ERs. This will allow us to bring Hello Kitty to the North American market, and potentially elsewhere in the world."

While there is definitely an added expense in providing this product—for example, the licensing fee, special in-flight items, etc—to its credit EVA prices its Hello Kitty service like any other. In fact, it provides the airline with ancillary revenue. "When we launched the Hello Kitty Jets our load factor on those routes went up 3%," confides Cheng. "And duty free sales on



To date, there are three A330-300s and two A330-200s involved in the Hello Kitty promotion, each with a unique livery. A 777-300ER is due to appear in 2013. 'The Magic Jet' (A330-302 B-16331) depicts Hello Kitty sprinkling magic stars for a happy journey.



The second Hello Kitty design was 'The Apple Jet' (A330-302 B-16332), a reflection of the heroine's love for the fruit. Kitty is five apples tall and weighs three apples, and her favorite food is mother's homemade apple pie.



'The Happy Music Jet' (A330-203 B-16311) carries a 'fanciful melody to inspire happiness in the air'.

PHOTOS: MANUEL NEGRERIE



The 'Speed Puff Jet' (A330-203 B-16309) features Hello Kitty and her friends riding the 'somersault clouds' of East Asian folklore to their destinations.



PHOTOS: MANUEL NEGRETE

Even aircraft tractors are part of the Hello Kitty theme.



EVA

Jackie Way is the only person to date to be presented with a golden boarding pass.

those flights are six times higher than on others."

Cheng tells *Airways* that Hello Kitty fans love collecting, so the airline has a promotion whereby passengers can obtain items by turning in their boarding passes from Hello Kitty flights. A modest gift for those who have flown on two flights; and for someone who has flown on all seven routes, plus an 'exceptional flight' (when a Hello Kitty Jet is deployed on a regular sector), a boarding pass made of real gold embossed with the passenger's name. To date, only one customer has earned the coveted golden pass.

Sanrio is closely involved with EVA in designing the schemes applied to the aircraft as well as the in-flight products, and the array of Hello Kitty duty free items that include high-end jewelry. It takes about four months to work on the aircraft design, and one week to paint the livery, which is done in Taipei by Evergreen Aviation Technologies (EGAT), a maintenance, repair, and overhaul establishment jointly owned by EVA and General Electric.

"We are constantly developing new in-flight products, so our passengers can have a different experience," notes Cheng. "We may consider other theme experiences in the future, but for now our focus is on Hello Kitty." →

Ever-modest EVA Air



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EVA Air will have 22 Boeing 777-300ERs by June 2016.

Over the past two decades since beginning service in 1991, EVA Air (*Airways*, February 2011 & December 1999) has become a respected airline, not only in Taiwan but also at the more than 50 destinations around the world on its network. While some airlines brag about being the largest, or serving the most cities, or flying the world's biggest airliner, EVA is more modest. "Our founder knew that we couldn't be the biggest airline in the world, especially when our traffic rights are limited, but we could aspire to be the best service airline, focused on quality and safety," says EVP Austin Cheng. To that end, EVA has made huge investments in pilot and cabin crew training.

Innovation, too, has been a hallmark of the airline. It was the first in the world to offer a premium economy cabin, which it did from inception. "People told us it wouldn't work, because business passengers wouldn't downgrade and economy class passengers wouldn't pay extra for the upgrade," concedes Cheng. "But we let the market decide, and it was successful. Other airlines are now introducing premium economy cabins."

Initially, 'Evergreen Deluxe', as it was then known, comprised between 70 and 80 seats, but when the company realized that this class was always fully booked, but economy was not, the decision was made to enlarge the premium section. So much so that the majority of seats on the airline's Boeing 747-400s were in Evergreen Deluxe. Cheng admits that more seats did not translate into more sales. The market indicated that the 50-70 range was the right number of premium economy seats. Now marketed as 'Elite Class', EVA offers the product on long-haul flights operated by 747-400s and 777-300ERs. Having experienced Elite class on two trans-Pacific flights, I can attest to the overall comfort offered by the 2-4-2 layout and 38-40in (96-101cm) seat pitch. And with a premium of around \$500 on a return fare, Elite is good value.

EVA is facing increased competition from the low-cost sector, and has reacted with upgraded service for the premium market. A \$100 million investment of 'Royal Laurel Class' was unveiled in 2011 on the Taipei-New York (JFK) route. Exclusive to the 777-300ER, Royal Laurel has fully lie-flat seats, and a host of other luxury



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Cargo accounts for more than a third of EVA Air's business. This is one of six McDonnell Douglas MD-11Fs in the fleet.

touches. Recently added to the Los Angeles route, this product will be extended to other city pairs throughout 2013. "We want to create a first class experience for our customers and treat them like royalty," explains Cheng. "The response has been very positive. We've seen our business class yields on these routes go up 15%, without compromising load factor."

As at all airlines, fuel prices are a big challenge for EVA Air, and the 777-300ER will replace three 747-400 combis in 2014 and the three all-passenger Dash 400s in 2016. EVA's agreement with Boeing and GE Capital will see seven 777s delivered between 2014 and 2017. "We intend to keep our nine 747-400 freighters, but given the changing nature of cargo, we may consider the 777 freighter," says Cheng. "Taiwan is a huge exporter of electronics and the goods are becoming smaller, so maybe there isn't the need for the large cargo capacity that the 747 offers."

Cargo is very important to EVA, representing 36% of total revenue. Ten years ago, the airline had envisaged cargo making up 50% of the business, but it has since realized it was not a realistic ambition. Instead, EVA is increasing passenger capacity, particularly on the cross-strait market between Taiwan and mainland China.

EVA is now taking delivery of 12 A321s that will replace seven McDonnell Douglas MD-90s by 2016. Many countries in East Asia are opening their skies to Taiwan, which make the A321 a perfect fit, and the type is likely to serve secondary cities in China.

In March 2012, EVA Air was accepted for membership of the Star Alliance. "We had been carefully evaluating joining an alliance for the past ten years," reveals Cheng. "An airline can never be an individual and stay competitive in today's industry, and Star offered the best match for us to enhance our service and network." EVA will join the alliance this year.

If partnering with other airlines is critical to EVA's future success, then so too are long-needed improvements at Taipei Taiyuan International Airport (*Airways*, September 2012). Cheng tells *Airways* that the government now realizes that if it wants to develop Taiwan and remain competitive, it needs to expand the airport. "The success of EVA Air and China Airlines [Taiwan's largest airline—*Airways*, February 2011] depends on it," Cheng adds. "Facility enhancements at the airport need to happen, because we have a lot of passengers that use Taipei to connect from North America and Europe."

You are not likely to hear boastful pronouncements from EVA. Yet, despite its size and relative youth, EVA has achieved success. And its courage to embrace innovation, such as a premium economy class and Hello Kitty-theme service, are worth celebrating. ➔



PHOTOS: MANUEL NEGRERE



EVA Air's MD-90s, leased from Uni Air, are being replaced by Airbus A321s (below).

Business Flyer

EVA Air Hello Kitty



MANUEL NEGRERIE

Flights:	BR160, BR159
Route:	Taipei-Taoyuan, Taiwan (IATA: TPE)—Seoul-Incheon, South Korea (ICN); and return
Aircraft:	Airbus A330-300

You can be forgiven if you've never heard of Hello Kitty, the Japanese cartoon character created by Yuko Shimizu. But you may be surprised to hear that what began as an image on a coin purse in 1974 has grown into a \$5 billion global business. Kitty White is a Japanese bobtail cat with a red bow in her hair, and was 'born in the suburbs of London', according to the character profile. Her family of characters appear on a variety of popular products ranging from clothing, accessories, dolls, stationery, and fine jewelry, besides airliners. So I found myself checking in for a Hello Kitty flight in 'Premium Laurel' class at Taipei's Taoyuan International Airport (Airways, September 2012).

Check-in counters opened 2½ hours before departure, although passengers on Hello Kitty flights can use the self-service kiosks. Bright pink, these are surely the most photographed examples in the world. After receiving my Hello Kitty boarding pass, and going through security and immigration, a process that took 20 minutes, I retired to EVA's Evergreen Lounge. Even the invitation card for the oasis had the cat character's image on it. This spacious area offered the usual amenities, including showers, and a number of Chinese dishes, snacks, and drinks. Next to this is the Garden Lounge, an open-air space surrounded by trees and plants, where guests can request made-to-order meals.

Waiting at the gate was 'The Global Jet', decorated with some of the world's great landmarks. Onboard, a looping animated cartoon played on the seatback video monitor, in which Hello Kitty welcomed everyone aboard and wished us a pleasant flight. Passengers were serenaded by the Hello Kitty theme song, coming from the overhead speakers. Although unfamiliar with this cheery music, I was reminded of Disney's *It's a Small World* playing over and over again. Even the safety card had Kitty on it.

Large, colorful pillows were placed on each seat, and with a light load of five others in the 24-seat business cabin, I settled into seat 9K, with a seat pitch of 61in (155cm). Champagne, juice, and water, along with hot towels, were offered before departure. With dual Jetways in use, I had no idea that the economy cabin was nearly full with 278 passengers.

Cabin announcements were in English, Mandarin, and Korean. Pushback was initiated on schedule at 1515 for the two-hour flight north to Seoul. As we taxied away from the terminal, three ground staff waved us off in customary Asian style. A ten-minute taxi brought us to Runway 05R, used most often by EVA as most of the airline's flights are staged from the south side of the airport.

After takeoff, cabin attendants, wearing pink Hello Kitty aprons, delivered a well presented appetizer consisting of smoked salmon parcel with cheese filling, and smoked halibut rolled with apricot chutney. On the plate was a small piece of zucchini in the shape of—you guessed it!—Hello Kitty. This was followed by steam fried shrimp dumplings, coated with shredded compoy (dried scallops) in an egg white sauce. It became a little like a game as I tried to find where catering had cleverly created and placed Hello Kitty imagery—the carrot that had been cut in the shape of the friendly feline and the red bow atop the dumplings. The garlic bread that came with the meal was probably the best I've ever had. It may seem like a small thing, but bread is difficult to deliver well on an airplane. It can often be dry, but EVA earned top marks for this one. The pumpkin cheesecake that followed was full of flavor, and the pink Hello Kitty chocolate was a nice touch. It all tasted delicious and not unlike what you would expect in a fine restaurant.

With my stomach sated, I settled back in my seat and let the music from the 'Star Gallery' audio/visual on demand entertainment system fill my ears. The quality of the in-flight Airshow was excellent. Cruising at some 40,000ft, I thought perhaps Hello Kitty might even have been up front flying the airplane; but I later met the captain and first officer, and both looked human.



One of the famous check-in kiosks. Large pillows await those seated in business class.

It was one of those perfect days. The air was smooth over the East China Sea, and warm light from the setting sun spilled into the cabin. There are moments that you wish could go on forever—this was one of them. But two hours after leaving Taipei, Captain Nico Lin and First Officer Carlos Moreno put the aircraft down on Runway 16 at Seoul Incheon International Airport, which has been rated by the Airports Council International as the world's best for seven consecutive years.

As I was waiting at immigration, I looked up at a large video monitor, which read: 'Incheon Airport...loved by people worldwide'. And no doubt people worldwide love Hello Kitty, too.

Incheon International Airport is located about 30mi (50km) west of Seoul; one of the initial criticisms when the decision was made to build the airport was that it was too far from the city. Despite the distance, transport is excellent. A 43-minute express train runs every half hour, while the regular train, offering more frequent service with multiple stops, currently travels the route in 53 minutes. I chose, however, to take one of the many coach-style buses that link various parts of the city with the airport in 70 minutes.

As in Taipei, the Hello Kitty theme was displayed on the check-in counter monitors. While waiting, I noticed paper signs liberally posted throughout the check-in area advising passengers in three languages that due to a fleet rotation



issue our flight would depart at 2030, some 45 minutes after the scheduled departure time. The check-in agent also mentioned the delay. It took just five minutes to clear immigration and security, after which I boarded the underground shuttle train for the 90-second trip to the concourse terminal, used by all non-Korean carriers. EVA Air business class customers have access to Asiana's lounge.

Boarding began at 2000, with juice and water offered when everyone was seated. One cabin attendant kindly turned on my overhead light when she noticed I was reading. The captain made an announcement apologizing for a short delay because of an air traffic hold at the airport. At 2050 we pushed back from Gate 125, and the high-definition Airshow displayed our location on the ground as we taxied for Runway 33L.

As on my first flight, the meal was well presented. The crab meat salad and slice of smoked duck was delicious; however, the combination of tastes from the pork patty with cheddar cheese in onion and bacon sauce was a little overwhelming for my taste.

Overall impression

EVA Air provided an excellent in-flight experience. Almost without exception its meals were first rate and properly presented, and I was impressed with the way in which the delayed departure from Seoul was communicated. I wasn't sure what to expect of the Hello Kitty flights, but EVA Air has created a flying experience that would definitely appeal to the young traveller or ardent fan. ➔



A Hello Kitty-shaped zucchini in the starter dish.



Wearing Hello Kitty pink aprons, two charming flight attendants hold children's economy class meal boxes.



Pumpkin cheesecake with a Hello Kitty chocolate.



Sterile cockpit: the only cabin on a Hello Kitty Jet untouched by the theme. Captain Nico Lin (left) and First Officer Carlos Moreno after a two-hour flight from Taipei to Seoul.