



# THE SPEEDBIRD SOARS ON



It's been 23 years—half of my lifetime—since I last flew British Airways (BA). So I was looking forward to doing it again. Then, as now, the equipment was a Boeing 747. It's a treat these days to experience one of the world's most legendary and beautifully designed aircraft, sadly becoming less common as it's slowly but steadily being phased out.

Story by KEN DONOHUE

**WHILE IT'S BEEN** nearly a quarter of a century since I last stepped inside a British Airways plane, I often watch the dark blue belly of BA's Boeing 747-400s fly over my house, as they line up for approach to Vancouver International Airport (YVR).

While YVR doesn't have as many daily flights as, say, New York, it has been an important route for BA, and one that I suspect is profitable.

There are long cultural and historical ties between Canada's west coast and Britain. Just the name alone, British Columbia—the country's westernmost province and a former British colony—speaks of a shared connection. It's

echoed further in the region's place names. New Westminster, Surrey, Prince George, Prince Rupert, and Victoria, the provincial capital, named for the formidable 19<sup>th</sup> century queen.

British Airways initiated service to Vancouver in 1981. Two years later, it began operating the Boeing 747, a fixture on the route for more than 30 years. In recent years, BA has been operating

11 flights a week between London and Vancouver in the peak summer season; this year, however, the airline will operate just daily during the summer, albeit with the larger Airbus A380, the first scheduled service of the type to YVR.

I was taking my 11-year old son on his first trip to Europe. Booking our tickets on the BA website was easy and, since Paris was our final destination, I reserved an open jaw ticket: YVR-London (LHR) on the outbound leg, and Paris (CDG)-LHR-YVR on the return.

As is sometimes the case, this was cheaper than simply a YVR-LHR return fare. We'd 'fly' at ground-level on the Eurostar train between London and Paris.

**Vancouver-London  
British Airways 84  
Boeing 747-400  
Class: World Traveller Plus**

On the morning of our departure for London, we received an email and a text message from BA Customer Service notifying us of a delay to our flight. Instead of a scheduled departure at 21:00, they now anticipated a 22:40 takeoff.



I appreciated the notification and, since the notice was delivered some 20 hours before departure, I could only speculate that issues with aircraft availability were to blame. This route seemingly has some schedule reliability issues, with delays common.

Check-in was quick and, with few flights departing at this time, the queue for security was relatively short. We were invited to use the airline's *Galleries Lounge*, on the second level, adjacent to our departure gate, D64.

The lounge was welcoming and nicely appointed, with striking images of both London and Paris covering one wall. Expansive windows looked out onto the air-side operations.

The lounge offered the usual snacks and drinks you'd expect. I was extremely impressed by the staff. Instead of standing in the shadows as I've noticed some lounge staff do at other airports, the employees here were very engaging, welcoming passengers



2 PHOTO: KEN DONOHUE

1 BA Boeing 747-400 departing YVR and returning home to London (LHR).

2 BA has been serving the Vancouver - London route for 35 years.

3 Dinner service in BA's World Traveller Plus (premium economy) cabin.

and offering to refill drinks and plates of food. The only complaint: the lounge felt cramped with too many chairs, too close together for the size of the space.

Once at the gate, the agents apologized for the by-now longer delay. Twenty-five minutes prior to our revised departure time of 23:15, boarding commenced through dual jet bridges.

Business Class and World Traveller Plus passengers, along with an amusingly long list of people having various levels of

status with BA, oneworld, and partner airlines were invited to board first.

The 36-seat Premium Economy cabin is situated near the front of the aircraft, between the First Class and Business cabins. Seats are in a 2-4-2 configuration and feature a 38-inch seat pitch. Once passengers were settled, Flight Attendants (FA) brought around Champagne and water, along with a menu card for the meal service. The Captain made an announcement apologizing for the delay and introduced the flight and cabin crew.

More than 2½ hours after our scheduled departure, we pushed back at 23:35. Our Boeing 747 wasn't alone that evening. Taiwanese carriers EVA (BR) (*Airways*, March 2016) and China Airlines (CI) also had their large Boeings on the ground awaiting flights home.

At 23:52, our aircraft, *Speedbird* 84, was cleared for takeoff by air traffic control, and the Boeing 747's four Rolls-Royce engines powered us off runway 26L.

Shortly after takeoff, drink service commenced, followed by dinner. Two main dishes were offered. I chose the beef tenderloin with gooseberry red wine sauce, accompanied by bok choy, chive mashed potatoes, and baby carrots. I wasn't disappointed. The steak was tender and delicious. And the chocolate caramel cake topped it off nicely.

The cabin crew were gracious and engaging, treating passengers with the sort of casualness that felt like you had been invited to a friend's house for tea. The crew genuinely appeared to enjoy their jobs.

The in-flight entertainment system had the usual mix of



3 PHOTO: KEN DONOHUE

## / airways traveler /

options, including a wide selection of the latest movies, but the size and quality of the personal video monitor was decidedly poor.

Not surprising, BA is set to retire part of its Boeing 747 fleet and, perhaps, it has chosen not to invest heavily in its in-flight products for the aging aircraft. Still, it was disappointing.

As the airline replaces the 747s with 49 new wide-body aircraft over the next years, the cabin product will be improved. These aircraft will be primarily Boeing 787s and Airbus A350s. However, BA did decide to keep 18 747s, all refitted with the latest cabin products.

Through the night, we tracked over northern Canada, south of Greenland, and Iceland, before flying over Belfast, Northern Ireland. Before our descent into London, we were given a brightly designed breakfast snack box, featuring a very British motif.



4 PHOTO: KEN DONOHUE



5 PHOTO: KEN DONOHUE

4 A very British looking snack box.

5 Complimentary snack and beverage in economy on BA's Euro Traveller service between Paris and London.

6 BA Boeing 747-400 arriving at YVR, with Vancouver's North Shore Mountains providing a nice backdrop.

Descending into a gray soup of cloud, the Captain announced that heavy winds at LHR were affecting the landing flow rate and that air traffic control had put us in a holding pattern, which he expected to last five to 10 minutes. Once on our turbulent approach, we passed over central London, with the city's iconic structures—Big Ben, The London Eye—visible from the right side of the aircraft. After being airborne for nine hours, we finally landed on runway 27L at 16:45 local time and taxied to Terminal 3.

After waiting for some time in a long immigration queue, an officer informed us that we needed to complete a landing card for each person entering the country. When I told him that the airline's crew had said that we only needed one per family, he replied sharply, "They don't know what they're talking about."

We retired to the back wall and completed another card, all the while thinking that, of all airline



6 PHOTO: MAREK WOZNIAK



crews, one would expect those of BA to know the protocol for visitors completing UK landing cards.

**Paris (CDG)-London (LHR)  
British Airways 315  
Airbus A319  
Class: Euro Traveller**

BA's Euro Traveller is a specially branded Economy Class product on select routes throughout Europe. The aircraft are equipped with new leather seats and complimentary snacks and drinks.

Paris' CDG Airport is easy to reach by the city's RER train network. BA operates out of Terminal 2. As I noticed on previous visits to CDG, the airport isn't as passenger-friendly as it could be. There's a long walk from the train station to many of the check-in counters. The BA check-in area is located downstairs, separate from the other check-in areas.

Check-in was quick and efficient, our bags tagged through to our final destination, YVR. The agent reminded us that, once we landed at LHR, we would need to transfer from Terminal 5 to Terminal 3 for our onward flight.

The customs and security area was relatively busy at mid-day, and it took about 20 minutes to complete formalities. Located at ground level, a bank of windows in the security area looked out on the ramp area, offering a nice diversion while in the queue.

Boarding the 123-seat Airbus A319 began 25 minutes before our scheduled departure. BA operates 44 of the A319s, with some higher-density aircraft on UK domestic flights. On European flights, aircraft are configured with a larger Business Class cabin.

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The FAs were friendly and good-humored as they greeted passengers on board the aircraft. The inside of the cabin felt fresh, with stylish dark colored leather seats that had BA's distinctive speedmark logo, branded into the top of the seats.

With the aircraft nearly full, we pushed back from Gate A47 at 14:55, five minutes behind schedule. The announced flying time was one hour. As we taxied to the runway we passed one of Air France's Concorde's.

Under gray and rainy skies, we rolled off runway 27L at 15:08.

Soon after takeoff, Pedro Monzon, the flight's Purser, and his team of three other FAs began their in-flight service, which, in Economy, included a complimentary drink and cookie or chips.

Crossing the English Channel and entering UK airspace, the Captain

announced that there would be a short delay into Heathrow owing to air traffic constraints, common at Europe's busiest airport. But soon, he announced that they had negotiated a shortcut and warned the FAs that we would be landing in 10 minutes. He was close. It was actually 14 minutes.

At 14:57 local time, we touched down on runway 09L. It took just eight minutes to get to our parking stand at Terminal 5.

**London-Vancouver  
British Airways 85  
Boeing 747-400  
Class: World Traveller**

A convenient bus transfer took us from Terminal 5 to Terminal 3, whence our flight to Vancouver was to depart. While it was some distance across the field, it was a delight to get up close with LHR's airside operations.

On entering Terminal 3, passengers are required to go

7 At LHR being prepared for a flight to Vancouver before going technical forcing a lengthy delay, while a new aircraft was serviced



7 PHOTO: KEN DONOHUE

through security. Somehow, our boarding passes had gone astray at this time, but agents at the BA's customer service desk kindly printed new ones, and our aircraft was showing an on-time departure, in two hours.

We walked to Gate 36, which is at the end of a long concourse extending from the main area of the terminal. Surprisingly, in the long walk from the connections area to the gate, there were no shops and restaurants, just a handful of vending machines. With four gates in this area, the waiting lounge was spacious and bright.

At the gate, crew were catering a 1990-built Boeing 747-400 and I could see some movement in the cockpit. But, as the time neared for our departure, no airline or airport staff were present, and the departure sign simply read, 'Gate Closed'. Concerned that perhaps we had gone to the wrong area, I double-checked my boarding pass, which confirmed that our flight was indeed supposed to depart from Gate 36. There were no flight departure monitors in this part of the terminal. There were about 25 or so other passengers waiting, who I could also see were starting to ask questions of one another, also thinking that they were in the wrong place. With 45 minutes before our scheduled departure, and still with no airline staff in sight, I overheard another passenger mention that our flight was delayed 90 minutes. There were also rumors of a gate change.

Surprisingly, no one from the airline communicated any information to passengers waiting at the gate. There was a total absence of customer service—an unacceptable disregard for these passengers.

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With an announced flying time of just over nine hours, Capt. Duncan said that they would try to cut a few minutes off the flight.”

At 17:25, our scheduled departure time, and still no airline staff around, I noticed a BA Boeing 747-400 being towed to the gate next to ours.

Just before 18:00, the airline staff arrived, and a departure sign at Gate 40 finally showed the flight to Vancouver, albeit with the original departure time, which had long since passed.

Initially, none of the gate agents acknowledged the delay. It was only after general boarding began at 18:30 that one of the staff apologized for being late.

By contrast, Captain Alex Duncan, in command of our flight, extended his apologies for

the delay once all passengers had boarded. He explained that our original aircraft had experienced technical issues that could not be resolved and they had made the decision, late in their preflight procedures, to bring in another aircraft. The new aircraft needed to be serviced, catered, and fueled.

With an announced flying time of just over nine hours, Captain Duncan said that they would try to cut a few minutes off the flight. But, as we'd be flying westward into the prevailing winds, it was unlikely we'd be able to make up much time.

At 19:15, almost two hours late, and with a nearly full aircraft, we pushed back. A 15-minute taxi



8 PHOTO: KEN DONOHUE



9 PHOTO: KEN DONOHUE

8 The inviting entrance to BA's Galleries Lounge at YVR.

9 Spacious departure lounge at London Heathrow Airport.

10 The stylized Union Flag was introduced in 2000 after replacing the "World Tails" livery.

11 British Airways is still one of the largest operators of the Boeing 747.



PHOTO: KEN DONOHUE 10



11 PHOTO: KEN DONOHUE

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brought us to runway 09R, where we took off to the east and then headed north over Manchester and Glasgow.

Thirty minutes after takeoff, drinks were served. Then dinner. The chicken dish was particularly tasty, as was the chocolate and salted caramel pudding for dessert. An hour before landing, a snack box decorated as a picnic basket was brought around.

As we'd experienced on our first flight, the IFE was extremely poor. Sure, there was audio-visual on demand (AVOD), but the small screen, poor video quality, and the most basic in-flight map were disappointing.

And the position of the AVOD controls, on the top of the arm rest, made it a risk to simply rest one's arm: you'd interrupt programming or turn the lights on. My son was none too pleased as I inadvertently kept pausing his movie.

Nearing Vancouver, we flew over the world-renowned ski resort of Whistler. Soon, we joined the approach for runway 26R. We touched down at 20:36.

### Overall Impressions

For the most part, British Airways offered a good experience. Crews were personable and the catering, even in Economy, was good. Significant delays on both trans-Atlantic flights were an inconvenience and something I trust the airline takes seriously. The complete lack of customer service and communication of the delay out of London, however, was concerning and unacceptable. 🙄

AIRWAYS RANKING	
RESERVATION	9.00
CHECK-IN	10.00
BOARDING	8.00
SEAT	6.00
AMBIANCE	7.00
IFE	4.00
CREW	8.00
FOOD	8.00
ON-TIME	2.00
<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>6.80</b>

\*Airways Rankings are based on a scale of 0-10.