

# RTW Sky-trek with Skytrax 5-stars

*by Ken Donohue*



Skytrax, an independent UK-based research company, launched its airline star ranking program in 1999. According to David Tait of Skytrax, every airline in the ranking is subject to detailed quality audit assessment by the organization's research staff who analyze more than 900 different aspects of product and service delivery levels.

*Airways* recently experienced the economy class service of some of the world's Skytrax-rated 5-star international airlines. Of those chosen for this exercise, Malaysia Airlines (IATA: MH/ICAO: MAS), Singapore Airlines (SQ/SIA), and Cathay Pacific (CX/CPA) have been 5-star since inception of the Skytrax program, while Qatar Airways (QR/QTR) was added in 2005. However, Asiana Airlines (OZ/AAR) which was added a year later, was not interested in participating. So I arranged for my round-the-world (RTW) trip to start in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, on Alaska Airlines (rated 3-star by Skytrax).



**Airline:** Malaysia Airlines  
**Sectors:** Los Angeles, California (IATA: LAX/ICAO: KLAX)–Taipei, Taiwan (TPE/RCTP)–Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (KUL/WMKK)  
**Flight:** MH95  
**Aircraft:** Boeing 747-400

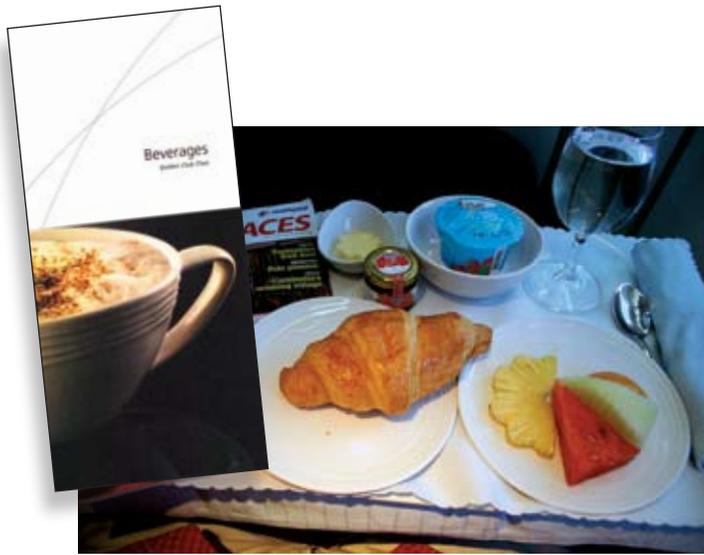
Following a two-and-a-half hour flight from Vancouver on Alaska, I arrived at LAX at 2300 to connect with my first 5-star flight on Malaysia Airlines, which was scheduled to depart at 0140. Alaska kindly checked my luggage through to Kuala Lumpur, even though I had separate tickets for each sector. At LAX, I walked from Terminal 3 to the Tom Bradley International Terminal and was glad that my bag had already been tagged through, because the check-in queue was very long. Malaysia has a special counter for transit passengers and those with no checked luggage, so it took only 15 minutes to receive a boarding pass.

After passengers have checked their baggage, they are required to proceed to another queue for their bags to be screened. Unsure whether this was normal airport security practice, I joined the line. Amidst the chaos, a man in front turned to me and said, "Welcome to a third world airport." I quickly realized that because my baggage had already been checked at Vancouver, I could proceed directly to security. Surprisingly, this was rather smooth and efficient.

The departure area was abysmal and disappointing. Toilets were filthy, and there was little in the way of attractions to keep passengers occupied except for two small shops, a restaurant, currency exchange, and a small duty free stand. During a two-hour period at this time of night, more than 2,500 passengers would have passed through on long-haul flights to Tahiti, Taipei, Seoul, and Kuala Lumpur. I did notice some construction, however, so perhaps there are plans to improve this area.

With little for passengers to do, most waited at the departure gate for more than hour until the flight was called. Just before boarding I was summoned to the counter for an important message. I had been upgraded to business class. "But...but...but..." I managed to stammer. This project was intended to be about the economy experience of 5-star airlines. How could I be true to the





story whilst lounging in the front of the airplane? But how do you turn down an upgrade? The airline probably doesn't even have a procedure for that. Besides, my economy seat, 40A, had probably already been allotted to someone else.

Once on board I did ask the flight attendant if I could sit in economy on the Taipei-Kuala Lumpur leg. Giving me a puzzled look he said, "Why would you want to sit back there?" He was right, of course; why would I want to do that? So I sank into my business seat and started testing the various functions, which included a light ten-minute massage.

A selection of juices was served after boarding, and the chief steward shook everyone's hand whilst personally introducing himself to all the passengers in business class. A wide selection of Malaysian and American newspapers was available.

Malaysia is known for exquisite cuisine, and the flag carrier didn't disappoint. Two delicious meals were served between Los Angeles and Taipei. An appetizer of Malaysian satay was also offered. In fact, the airline serves almost 20,000 sticks of satay on its flights each day. The only disappointment was the hard croissant offered

for breakfast before our 0625 arrival at Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport.

Throughout the flight, the cabin attendants were very attentive and gracious. Their warm smiles and playful spirit were welcoming and refreshing. I also noticed them draping blankets over passengers who had fallen asleep, and turning on reading lights for others.

Upon reaching Taipei, all onward passengers had to deplane and go through security, where we were able to wander through the many duty free shops. After a 90-minute stop, and with more fuel, food, and passengers loaded, we continued on the four-hour service to Malaysia.

Soon after departing from TPE, another meal was offered. I chose the Kung Pao Chicken and Chinese-style stir-fried noodles, which was especially tasty. And, to be fair, the croissant this time was as it should be.

At noon, and some 19 hours after leaving Los Angeles, we touched down at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), which has the distinction of being one of the best airports in the world (*Airways*, March 2003). Getting from the satellite terminal to the main terminal to clear immigration was very efficient thanks to the airport train. The only letdown was waiting at the baggage carousel for more than 40 minutes for my luggage. This was surprising, considering the arrivals area was practically deserted with few arriving flights at this time of day.

Finally collecting my bag, I proceeded to the airport train station, and climbed aboard the KLIA Express for the 28-minute trip into the city. I was staying at the Boulevard Hotel in Mid Valley, which was just one stop on the Kommuter train line from the Central Station. I spent two days in KL wandering through markets, eating delicious food, and ogling at the Petronas Towers, probably the most beautiful building I have seen. My next stop was Singapore.



PHOTOS: KEN DONOHUE



BOEING

To replace its 737 Classics, Malaysia Airlines has ordered 35 Next-Generation 737-800s, plus secured purchase rights for an additional 20. The aircraft will be fitted with Aviation Partners Boeing blended winglets.

- Airline:** Malaysia Airlines
- Sector:** KUL–Singapore (SIN/WSSS)
- Flight:** MH601
- Aircraft:** Boeing 737-400

I was able to check-in for this flight at KL’s Central Station before taking the KLIA Express to the airport. Passengers travelling on Malaysia, Cathay Pacific, Royal Brunei, and Emirates can use the city check-in service.

We were given another warm Malaysian welcome when boarding, and again newspapers were available for all passengers. We pushed back on time at 0805, and a short taxi brought us to Runway 14R to begin the 45-minute flight to the small island off the tip of the Malay Peninsula. While the cabin crewmembers were friendly, the in-flight service was average, as we were provided with only a glass of juice. There was no snack on offer during this morning flight.

Changi Airport (*Airways*, June 2008 & July 2000) is also regarded as one of the world’s best, and for good reason. It is the only airport I have been to where dishes of candy greet passengers at the immigration desk, and the only one I know that offers free, two-hour city tours for passengers with a layover. Singapore’s MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) station is located beneath Terminals 2 and 3 and can whisk passengers to the center of the city in about 27 minutes. But on this occasion, a van and guide from the Singapore Tourism Board were waiting to take me to my downtown hotel.

Singapore is a lovely city. And the drive from the airport to the city is one of the most pleasing anywhere. Stands of rain trees, palm trees, and flowering shrubs line the highway. My stopover in Singapore was only 24 hours, and it was made more comfortable by a stay at the Fairmont Singapore (conveniently located next to the legendary and iconic Raffles Hotel) which offers great views of the city, a relaxing spa, and delicious food.



FAIRMONT SINGAPORE

The pool area of the Fairmont Singapore.



ROB FINLAYSON

**Airline:** Singapore Airlines  
**Sector:** SIN–Dubai [Dubayy], United Arab Emirates (DXB/OMDB)  
**Flight:** SQ494  
**Aircraft:** Boeing 777-300

After a short yet enjoyable stay in Singapore, I returned to Changi for an evening flight to Dubai. Check-in took four minutes, and security and immigration were equally fast. There is no shortage of things to do at the airport—you can shop, see a movie, visit one of five themed gardens, or even take a dip in the rooftop swimming pool. With so much to do, I’m surprised people don’t miss their flights.

Much like Malaysia Airlines, we were warmly greeted by the Singapore cabin crew—including the famous ‘Singapore Girls’ outfitted in the traditional *sarong kebaya*—and after looking at the boarding passes they addressed each passenger by name. The first thing I noticed on the 777-300, apart from the fact that it was nearly empty, was the comfortable economy seats. There was extra padding at the front of the seat, which provided welcome support to the back of the thighs. A warm towel—a real towel—was offered to passengers before takeoff, and once we were airborne, the flight attendants took drink orders. Requesting a Singapore Sling, I sipped the delicious concoction as we crossed over the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

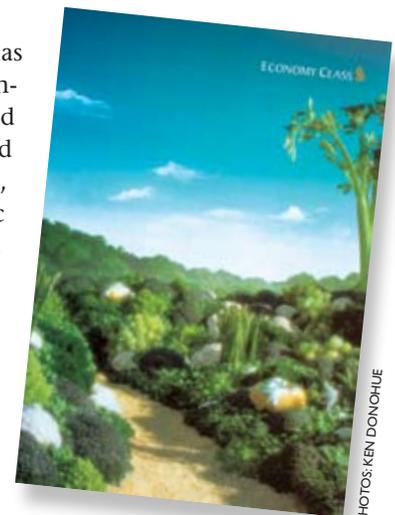
I had long believed that the one thing that distinguished the classes, apart from the seat, legroom, and service, was that in business the bun served with a meal is warmed, whereas in economy it is cold. But Singapore ruined my theory, when the dinner bun came warm. I ordered wine with dinner and it was served in real glass, not plastic. And during the seven-hour flight the cabin attendants came through with trays of juice and water so many times that I lost count.



Checking-in at Changi International Airport.

Singapore Airlines has long set the standard for in-flight entertainment (IFE) and its latest version of Krisworld satisfied, with 80 movies, 106 TV shows, 180 music CDs, and 60 video games. You can even play games against other passengers. For a moment I thought I would wait for someone to challenge me to a game of Tetris, but then I decided that with a light passenger load, I might be waiting for some time. After a very enjoyable flight, in which I could find no fault with Singapore Airlines, we landed at Dubai International Airport (*Airways*, August 2002).

The walk from our gate to the baggage claim area



PHOTOS: KEN DONOHUE



*The Burj Dubai (Dubai Tower).*

was surprisingly long. I had been to the Middle East before, so I thought I was prepared for the wave of heat that washed over me as I exited the terminal, but nothing can quite prepare you for the suffocating temperature which was in the mid-30°C range (95°F), although the sun had been down for a few hours. I joined the taxi queue and marveled at the large misting fans that struggled to keep people comfortable.

Dubai resembles one large construction site. The pace of development is staggering. As my taxi turned into the driveway of my hotel, The Palace/The Old Town, I felt like Aladdin riding on a magic carpet. Palm trees lined both sides of the reflecting pool that led to this Arabian ‘palace’. I was offered a glass of juice upon checking in, and the service from everyone at the hotel was impressive. In the morning, I set out to explore the hotel’s grounds, and noticed the yet-to-be-completed Burj Dubai, the world’s tallest building towering more than 2,000ft (610m).



TRISTAR-SPA

**Airline:** Qatar Airways  
**Sector:** DXB–Doha, Qatar (DOH/OTBD)  
**Flight:** QR101  
**Aircraft:** Airbus A330-300

DXB, like most others in the region, is operating beyond capacity. As such, a new mega-airport will open in due course. In the meantime, Qatar Airways currently operates out of the Sheik Rashid Terminal. Despite having five counters open for economy passengers, check-in took about 20 minutes, which was the longest during my trip. Passengers went through two security checks, once before check-in, and then another before proceeding to the departure gates. Both were fast and efficient.



Once the stragglers had boarded, the economy cabin of the Airbus A330-300 was nearly full. The aircraft seemed relatively new and the seats were a pleasing maroon color. Seats were equipped with footrests.

Before takeoff a glass of water and candy were offered, something that few airlines do for economy travellers. Score

one for Qatar Airways, I thought. Our 1130 STD came and went, with no reason given from the flightdeck or cabin crew. The airbridge had been pulled away from the aircraft, so presumably we were waiting for some baggage or cargo to be loaded. With the outside temperature a sizzling 42°C (107°F), the cabin was becoming quite warm. Almost 20 minutes late, we pushed back from Gate 25. A short taxi took us to Runway 30R, where we waited for three aircraft to land before lining up for takeoff. The flight to Doha was a direct 238mi (383km), 43-minute hop across the Persian Gulf.

A sign of a good airline is how people are cared for on a short flight. It's one thing to pamper long-haul passengers, with plenty of time to spare and—usually—an abundance of food and drink, but yet another on a short stage. In the case of my 45-minute trip a few days before from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore, Malaysia Airlines fell short of its 5-star distinction, as the service was surprisingly average. Qatar Airways, by contrast, not only offered water before takeoff, but we were also served a pre-packed sandwich that was surprisingly spicy and tasty, juice, and a cookie.

As we neared Doha, we banked over the new part of the city, which is experiencing significant growth and development, and lined up for an approach to Runway 16. Not far from the airport, thrust was increased and we started to climb. The passengers seated next to me felt a little uneasy about this, but soon the captain announced

that we were coming in too high and too fast, and in the interest of safety he had decided to abort the landing. We banked out over the ocean, made another pass of the city, and then made an uneventful landing.

Doha Airport, which in the next couple of years will be replaced by a new and larger version, has no airbridges; thus, passengers walk off the aircraft using the stairs and then are bused to the terminal. Economy passengers exit via the rear of the aircraft, first and business class from the front.

Qatar Airways had arranged for the 'Al Maha' meet-and-greet service, which is available to all passengers for a nominal fee. While an airline representative attends to your passport and immigration needs, you can rest comfortably in a lounge with newspapers, magazines, and refreshments. First class passengers are also met, as I was through the courtesy of the airline, at the aircraft with a BMW and chauffeur. So this is what it is like to be the emir, I thought, as I climbed into the car for the short drive to the terminal.

The Qatari government has never encouraged mass tourism, so visitor activities are limited; however, most people will find a short stop of some interest. Souq Waqif, the old marketplace in the center of Doha's old town, is an enjoyable place to wander. And a walk along the Corniche, especially at sunset, is a pleasant way to end the day. A number of resorts are currently being built, which are sure to draw many leisure travellers in the coming years.



PHOTOS: KEN DONOHUE

**Airline:** Qatar Airways  
**Sector:** DOH–Geneva [Genève], Switzerland (GVA/LSGG)–Newark (EWR/KEWR)  
**Flight:** QR083  
**Aircraft:** Airbus A330-300

Most airports have a separate queue at the check-in counters for business and first class. In Doha things are done a little differently. There are two terminals, one exclusively for first and business (and visiting



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journalists travelling around the world), and the other for economy passengers. The premium terminal is only for passengers flying on Qatar Airways. As a guest of the airline, I was probably the only economy passenger that day to use the premium terminal, which comes with spacious and well-appointed lounges, a business center, a spa, and some modest yet adequate duty free shops.

The first leg was a six-hour flight to Geneva, which was very comfortable, and the time went surprisingly quickly. Qatar Airways offers good service, with two meals on each leg, and, like the other 5-star carriers, has an extensive IFE system.

But there were two frustrations: plastic cutlery and the entertainment control unit was fixed to the armchair, making it difficult to use. I asked the lead cabin attendant if using plastic cutlery was standard practice for economy (I thought it may have been some inane US security rule), and he said it was. A 5-star hotel wouldn't use plastic cutlery for their guests, and neither should a 5-star airline. It may seem like a small issue, but little things like this make the difference between a good airline and a superior one. The flight attendant also told me that some aircraft are configured with the more contemporary IFE system. I was impressed when one of the flight attendants laid a blanket over me, when it was noticed that my eyes were shut.

Qatar Airways enjoys fifth freedom rights between Geneva and New York, so more passengers joined us for the trans-Atlantic portion. I was suitably entertained on both flights by the extensive and interesting selection of documentaries available on IFE.

We were anticipating an early arrival in Newark, which would have been welcome because I had only a couple of hours to transfer from EWR to JFK. Our approach to Newark was a little bumpy, but nothing out of the ordinary. Then, just as we cleared the perimeter fence, go-around power was applied. This was my second aborted landing in the past few days. My seat-mate laughed and commented that I would probably need to take a taxi to JFK, instead of two trains, as I had planned.

After we leveled off, the captain announced that wind shear had been detected, hence the decision to go around. Once on the ground there was another delay of 30 minutes because two aircraft were blocking our gate. It was then that I decided to opt for a taxi, which, incidentally, is highway robbery: \$91 for the fare and \$30 in bridge tolls. One toll was a whopping \$22, which must be a contender for the most expensive toll in the world. After being dropped off at JFK—and having emptied my wallet—I checked in for my last 5-star flight: a Cathay Pacific service to Vancouver.



**Airline:** Cathay Pacific Airways  
**Sector:** New York-JFK (JFK/KJFK)–Vancouver, Canada (YVR/CYVR)  
**Flight:** CX889  
**Aircraft:** Boeing 747-400

Cathay Pacific, along with Singapore, has long been deemed one of the best airlines in the world, so I was looking forward to my final flight on this RTW journey. After a 16-hour trip from Qatar, and an expensive cab ride across New York, I arrived at JFK's Terminal 7 for the 5½-hour trip to Vancouver, a service which continues on to Hong Kong.

Unsure of how much time I would have to connect in New York, I was able to check in for my flight while still in Doha. Cathay Pacific allows passengers to do so online up to 48 hours before departure time. Depositing my bag at JFK took only a few minutes, thanks to a dedicated counter for those who have checked in online, or who have no checked baggage. Airport security at this time of night was quick. Terminal 7 has plenty of shops and eateries, and even a spa and massage center. The flight was scheduled to leave at 2300, but the aircraft was late arriving, so our departure was delayed by about 30 minutes.

Once our aircraft was ready, it took some time to load the 747-400, in part because of those 'I'm afraid the airplane will leave without me people'. We've all seen them—the ones who crowd around the departure gate even though their seat number range hasn't been called, thus disrupting and delaying what should be an orderly boarding

process. The flight was full, with many of the passengers going only as far as Vancouver.

A meal service was provided shortly after takeoff. The cabin crew seemed a little rushed, and impersonal, but that may have been because of the full flight. As with Qatar, I was disappointed by the plastic cutlery in economy.

This 747 had Cathay's new seats and IFE system, 'Studio CX'. The shell seats were comfortable and had the best lumbar support I have experienced in economy. As well, there is extra support that wraps around your waist. And when you recline, you don't intrude on the passenger behind. At 9in (23cm), the personal TV screens are larger than those offered by the other airlines sampled. There didn't seem to be a footrest, and if there was, it wasn't clear how it worked. Nor was there was a seatback pocket to store headphones, books, and other items, although I later learned on Cathay's website that the 'seat pocket' has been moved below the seat cushion. In doing so, legroom has increased, despite the fairly standard 32in (81cm) seat pitch.

After nine days, seven flights, five countries, ten airports, and more than 23,000mi (37,000km), I landed at Vancouver International Airport at 0153, bringing an end to my 5-star, round-the-world adventure. ✈



*(For more about the trip, visit the author's blog at: <http://aroundtheworldin9days.blogspot.com>.)*

# ...and the best airline is?

The first question people have been asking me about my trip is, which is the best airline? It's a very difficult question to answer, because there are so many variables that influence an experience, such as the route, time of day, number of passengers onboard, and aircraft type. I had trouble finding any fault with Singapore Airlines, but the cabin crew had it relatively easy, because there were very few passengers on that flight. Would the service have been different if the airplane was full? Maybe not.

Generally speaking, you could scarcely go wrong choosing to fly on any one of these airlines. Not for nothing has each one been given a 5-star distinction. There are many similarities in service delivery between them, but they also have their own strengths and areas for improvement. Although it is neither easy nor fair to make comparisons, I have noted the top airlines in each category below based on my experience.

## Friendliness of cabin crew

### Malaysia Airlines & Singapore Airlines

The gracious nature and kind hospitality of the crews on both Malaysia and Singapore was remarkable, allowing these two airlines to excel in this area. There is something special about Southeast Asian hospitality that is hard for others to replicate.

*The author (right) and cabin crew of Singapore Airlines.*



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## In-flight entertainment

### Cathay Pacific

All of the airlines have good IFE systems; however, if I were to choose one as a standout it would have to be Studio CX, which offers 50 movies, 100 TV shows, 160 CDs, and a selection of games. The time to destination is displayed on the main screen, and seats in economy were equipped with power plugs.

## Pre-takeoff service

### Qatar Airways and Singapore Airlines

On both flights, Qatar brought a basket of candies for passengers, and on a 45-minute service, water was served to everyone before takeoff. Singapore scores top marks for being the only airline to provide real hot towels before takeoff, in economy. Qatar distributed warm towelettes a few times during the flight, but again Singapore raises the standard by offering towels.

## Food

### Qatar Airways

All of the airlines offered good food and selection, but I give the nod to Qatar for offering a light meal on a 45-minute flight. Kudos to both Singapore and Qatar for providing warm bread rolls in economy. It would, of course, be unfair to compare Malaysia's business class meals with those served in economy on the other airlines, but I should note that those were prepared and tasted as if I were eating in a fine restaurant.

## Seats

### Cathay Pacific

CX is currently installing new seats, and I was fortunate to try them. Singapore also had extra 'padding' on the edge of the seat, which provided support to the back of the thigh.

## Airport

### Singapore-Changi

Hands down, Singapore wins this contest with endless opportunities to keep passengers busy and entertained, including free city tours. Free wireless Internet is available throughout the airport, but the only drawback is you have to register using a mobile phone number.