

EDITOR'S CORNER

Flight of the Concorde

It is not often that one has a chance to do something really special in life. Recently I flew from New York to London in the supersonic Concorde. It was indeed a trip to remember.

I have flown in all kinds of aircraft in my travel career, mostly related to professional activities. As a matter of fact, I was on one of the early models of the DC-4 on my trip from inland China to Canton in 1948. My mother, three sisters and my dog rushed out of China before the fall of the Nationalist Chinese government at that time. I still remember that we were given parachutes in case we needed to bail out of the plane. I could imagine that I would have fallen straight down to the muddy rice patches before I would have figured out how to open that heavy chute! The sound in the plane was so loud that I could not hear a word my mother uttered to me. My sister's friend asked her to collect some clouds for her in a match box when we were in the sky. That science project did not go too far.

I took a flight from Hong Kong to Japan in a Boeing 707 in 1963. It was a most impressive plane at that time. Can you image that in the plane we were given small packages of cigarettes as a "perk" for the flight? Nowadays smoking is not allowed on most flights anywhere. Since those days I have been on the Boeing 727, 737, 747, 757, 767, 777 (what ever happened to 717?), DC 10 and MD this and that, and a variety of Aerobuses. These are beautiful and safe planes and I enjoyed them all and marvel at the take-offs and landings of those wonderful flying machines.

A few years ago, my wife, Catherine, had a chance to take the Air France Concorde from New York to Paris. I had the pleasure of seeing her off in New York. I watched as the magnificent plane taxied off the tarmac and moved to the end of the runway out of my sight. I had my camera trained on the flight path to take a picture of the take-off. Suddenly, I heard a great roar and the Concorde shot from the runway into the sky so fast that I did not have time to click my camera. There she went into the sky like a flash. In a matter of seconds the plane became a dot in the sky. Finally, in 30 min the dot was not visible. At that moment, I realized that Catherine was already about one-eighth of her way to Paris. I eventually found her in Paris one day later after I took my snail plane to Paris from Detroit.

Well, an opportunity occurred in March 2002 such that Catherine and I had the chance to fly together from New York to London in the British Airways Concorde. After 9/11, air travel has been a chore. Long lines at the check-in and even longer lines at the security check point. However, at the Concorde counter there was no one in line. We simply checked in and had our luggage taken care of by professional staff. The security was very thorough but not time consuming. Soon we were at the special lounge waiting to board the Concorde. At the lounge you can have anything you want — champagne, drinks, food, etc. while sitting in front of a glass window

looking at technicians preparing the Concorde for its journey across the Atlantic Ocean. It is a beautiful plane. Superbly designed like a big bird, aesthetically pleasing and simply a lovely piece of art. As I was tasting the delicious breakfast and looking at the plane I wondered why am I here to be so pampered? I was on my way to Germany to give some lectures — that was the reason!!

As I looked around I realized that not everyone was as excited as I was on boarding the Concorde. A bunch of executives were working frantically on their computers and waving their arms around while making telephone calls. I am sure they were making million dollar deals before the flight and that they will consummate the business at the airport in London and will fly home on the next Concorde to kiss their kids goodnight. Not me. I will leisurely enjoy my first Concorde flight.



DR. CATHERINE FUNG AND THE CONCORDE

The time had come to board and we lingered as long as we could to be the last group to enter the plane. As I walked into the plane, the first thing I noticed was that the plane was not that big. There was a center aisle with two seats at both sides to accommodate exactly 100 passengers. Our flight was about 80% full. The seats were very nice and ergonomically designed, perfectly fitted for Orientals like Catherine and me. For robust, 6 foot 5, and 300 pound football players at Kansas State University, it would not have been very comfortable. For once, small has its advantage.

The captain announced that we would be departing soon and asked us to buckle up. I am glad I did because after the captain said "I am starting now: engine one—two—three— and engine four", suddenly there was a great roar, the likes of which I have never heard before and then the plane raced down the runway at 300 MPH and took off almost immediately. I was being thrust into the sky with a tremendous force and my heart was pounding heavily. I am glad that I have a strong heart. By the time I realized that I was in the air I tried to say good-bye to New York City below but it was far gone from my sight already. The Concorde accelerated to Mach 1 (the speed of sound) in about 15 min and then quickly reached Mach 2 and shot up to the sky at 1,360 MPH. It stabilized at about 60,000 feet and cruised at that altitude the rest of the way. The feeling was incredible and fantastic. It was very tranquil up there. I could see the curvature of the earth (yes, Virginia, the world is round). The sky above was deep blue and the clouds below were like white silk and smooth sand. The temperature outside was -60C but the window was warm to the touch due to the friction of the elements against the Concorde. What a sensation!! This must have been what Dorothy and Toto experienced when they were "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" from the story, "The Wizard of OZ." I did not close my eyes the entire duration of the flight. It took only 3 h and 25 min from New York to London, a trip that usually takes 8 h or more.

The service was great. First the champagne and *Fromage de France*, then came the delicious *hors d'oeuvre*, caviar and vintage French wine, and onto a series of dishes and drinks which seemed to have popped out of some gourmet magazines I read in bookstores and never had a chance to taste. The whole trip was indeed a feast from start to finish. That was certainly the most expensive dinner I have ever had. I even went to the restroom just to look at the decor. I was not disappointed, the tiny room was beautifully decorated and full of welcoming fragrance. I lingered there a little longer than usual just to smell the roses in the lovely vase. I even took a picture of myself with my disposable camera at arm's length.

All too soon the lovely plane landed in London. I could hardly believe that I had taken the Concorde across the Atlantic Ocean. I felt like a different human being. After all, I had traveled twice the speed of sound for the first time in my life.

I highly recommend that everyone take the Concorde once in ones lifetime. Is it truly worth the anticipation and the joy of the experience? Definitely a resounding "YES". Would I take the Concorde again? Well, that depends on who is going to foot the bill, it is not exactly inexpensive. I do feel that my life has been greatly enriched just because I have taken the Concorde. Try it. You will like it.

DANIEL Y. C. FUNG