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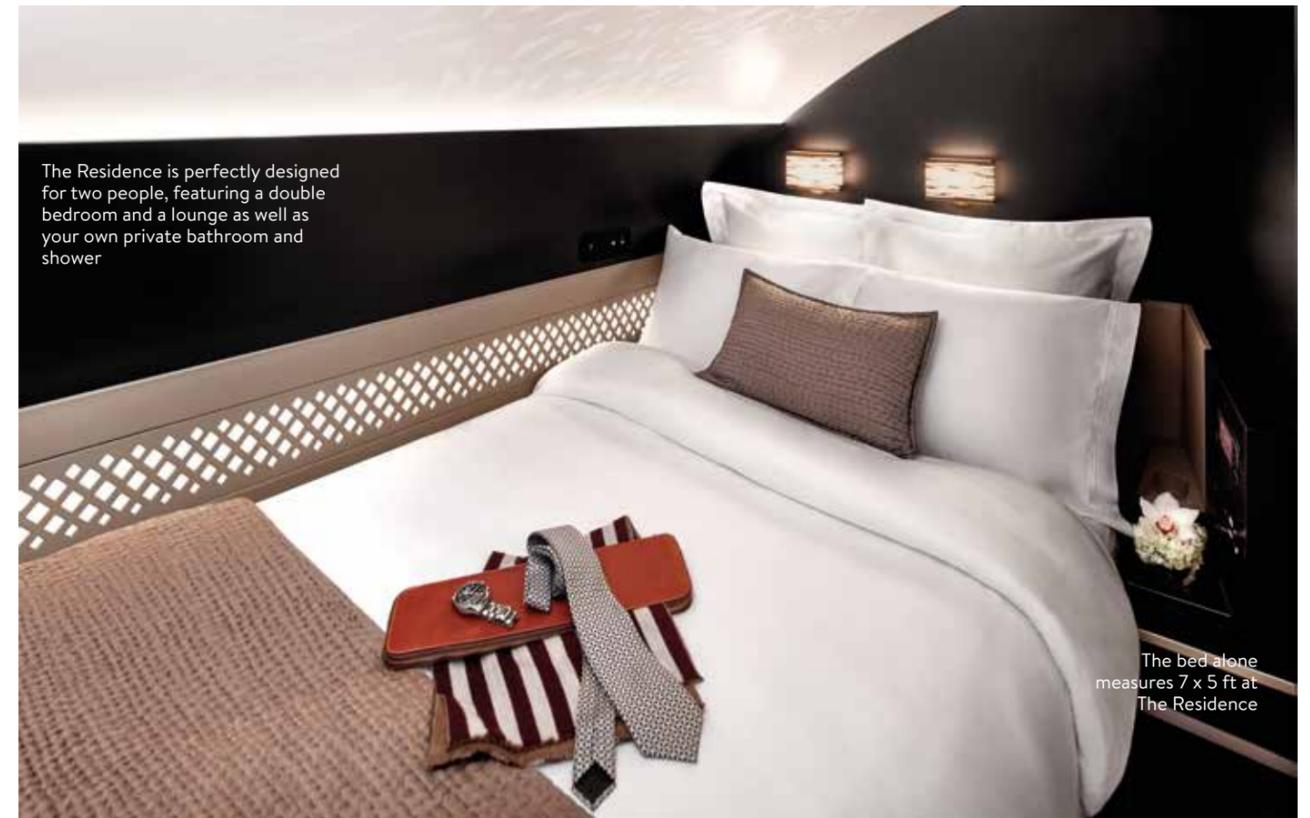
A PENTHOUSE IN THE SKY

Norah Casey takes a journey on board the world's first three-bedroomed suite in the sky in Etihad's recently unveiled Residence.

When my late husband Richard and I started travel writing many moons ago we didn't have a red cent. Travel writing was the only way we could afford to go anywhere. We were a great double act. Like me, he would often have to pinch himself that us two impoverished journalists would get to travel in style to incredibly beautiful places, turning left when boarding the plane with an upgrade to business or first class. So I am using that as his excuse for developing the inelegant habit of sending what he called "gloatagrams" to his men friends. These unashamedly bragging texts were accompanied by pictures of dramatic sunsets or impossibly luxurious suites and he would time them to coincide with their more miserable moments of the week. Monday morning was a special favourite. They in turn would try to outdo him so that sometimes on dreary winter days his phone would ping continuously with payback pictures of sun drenched beaches. Now



that I spend so much time travel writing I try to limit my bragging texts in the interests of keeping the friends I have, but I am guilty of sending the most shameless gloatagrams in recent weeks. Well it's not every day you send a selfie from the world's first penthouse apartment in the sky and dispatch it on Wi-Fi while flying at 30,000 feet. When Etihad Airways unveiled The Residence last November it revolutionised the world of luxury travel. The business woman in me wants to plunge straight into the innovative thinking that led to this previously unimagined concept. Competitors are undoubtedly already working on emulating the offering but, for the moment, Etihad Airways are flying alone uncontested in clear blue skies. But first, let me take you on a journey through The Residence because unless you are the luckiest travel journalist alive or have a cool €18,000 (20,000 US dollars) plus to spend on a one way trip from London to Abu Dhabi you might not get to experience this first hand. No



The Residence is perfectly designed for two people, featuring a double bedroom and a lounge as well as your own private bathroom and shower

The bed alone measures 7 x 5 ft at The Residence

"It's not every day you send a selfie from the world's first penthouse apartment in the sky and dispatch it on Wi-Fi while flying at 30,000 feet"

upgrades are available, regardless of who you are, and no travel journalist has ever got to travel in The Residence. So spending some time in the three-roomed penthouse was extra special.

The Residence is part of a whole new suite of "reimagined" space on Etihad's A380 which includes first class Apartments, intelligent work areas in Business Class, new, smarter economy seats with a firm headrest wing for flying comfort and an interior that feels more like an uber chic boutique hotel than an airplane.

But the luxury 125 square foot The Residence is the jewel in the crown of the airline's innovative new designs. A personal butler (trained at the Savoy Hotel in London) is assigned to Residence passengers, offering seamless five star service pre-flight, on board and après flight – a door to door luxurious experience that includes limousine transfers and concierge check-in (you can opt

to hand over your personal hand luggage to be stowed on board, passing through the fast track security with just boarding card and passport for minimum delay). From the moment we arrived at Dublin airport we were escorted by impeccably uniformed Etihad Airways staff who, with practiced professionalism and warmth, whisked us through from check-in to lounge to the steps of the aircraft at every stage of our journey. The Residence passengers can choose their meal preferences, even have a favourite dish made to order, films, music, games or any other extras that will make the service more personal or comfortable during the flight. Residence butler Dharshana who was on board for our A380 flight told me that he also has his own "kit-bag" for those little extras like repairing, polishing or stain removal. In the First Class Lounge your personal butler will organise spa



Actress Nicole Kidman, known for her style and elegant beauty, is the perfect Ambassador to front the campaign for The Residence at Etihad





It's hard to imagine the luxury of stretching out in a double bed 30,000 feet in the air as the world goes by below. The exclusive space really gives a new meaning to the expression 'Mile High Club'



The five-star Etihad Airways service continues in transit with spa treatments, dining and relaxation at Abu Dhabi

treatments (I had a wonderful foot massage at the Heathrow Lounge) and any meals, drinks or reading material.

So what does it look like? Having seen the promotional video for the Residence fronted by Etihad ambassador Nicole Kidman I already had a sense of how different this would be. Nonetheless it was quite unlike anything I have ever experienced on an airplane before. I read one travel writer's review which commented on how wonderful it was to turn left and then left again on the aircraft. Whatever about the joy of being amongst the uber elite who are used to travelling in such luxury, the journey to the Residence is impressive. The A380 interior is beautifully designed with a muted colour palette of champagnes and browns. As I passed along the only single-aisle first class cabin, curved lines and clever lighting combined to create a contemporary walkway flanked by the Arabic-influenced louvered doors of the first class Apartments. Dharshana was impeccably dressed in the new Etihad Airways livery. The recently unveiled cabin crew uniforms were designed by Italian haute couturier, Ettore Bilotta, a witty, retro-style suit and hat matching the signature chocolate brown colours with a splash of vibrant purple

Hard to imagine that there is a class above first class but when I arrived at the entrance to the Residence I had to remind myself that I was on board a plane, where I, along with most passengers, get assigned a seat for the journey rather than the space and privacy of your own three roomed suite. Dara and I stretched out on the Poltrona Frau Leather sofa in the lounge as Dharshana showed us the facilities which included a 32inch television, Champagne fridge, dining tables, a bathroom with shower and luxury toiletries from Aqua de Palma and a bedroom with a 7ft by 5ft double bed (and another 23inch TV).

The Residence is designed for two and is completely private and full height, so that once the door is closed there are no gaps between wall and ceiling. After a while, we wandered down the aisle to The Lobby lounge in the first class area to stretch our legs and along the way Dharshana showed us one of the new first class Apartments – designed similar to the lounge area of The Residence. Each had a sliding screen door for privacy, a banquette in the same Poltrona Frau Leather and a chaise longue opposite that converts into a bed. These mini-apartments have vanity units, television and mini-bar facilities and can also be joined together to create double beds for couples.

We were travelling from London to Abu Dhabi on the A380 and onwards to Phuket, returning from Phuket to Abu Dhabi and on to Dublin. So, over the course of the various plane journeys we also experienced the new intelligent work areas for business, which allowed me the space to work on the laptop and clear my emails via Wi-Fi, while the meal and drinks were being served. And later to stretch out in comfort on the cushioned flatbed and arrive refreshed.



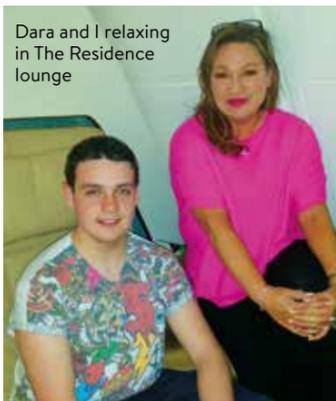
Meet Dharshana, our own personal butler at The Residence on our flight from London to Abu Dhabi. Like all The Residence butlers, he has trained at the Savoy



At night the double bedroom is an oasis of calm and tranquility. There is a real sense of luxury, a class above first class



“What if the journey was part of the holiday experience or, heaven forbid, the holiday itself”



Dara and I relaxing in The Residence lounge



JOURNEY TO THE TOP

Back in November, Etihad Airways welcomed its new superjumbo Airbus A380, a significant milestone for an airline that began in 2003 and ten years later had nearly 12 million passengers. The double decked futuristic A380 jetliner gave the airline the opportunity to showcase a talent for innovation and style. Starting with a blank canvas, Etihad's Innovation centre in Abu Dhabi started by asking airline passengers about their experiences and the niggles that irritated them. One thing that emerged was that passengers in economy said they liked the window seat – not because of the view – but because they could lean their head against the wall of the plane. So a new, smarter economy seat was born, with one firm head wing to lean against for napping.

There are many reasons why Etihad Airways stands out in a competitive market. Constantly striving to stay ahead of the curve in innovation and service offerings (Flying Nannies being just one of their imaginative customer-focused initiatives), the on-board cuisine is a step up from others in their class, but for me the real differentiator is the crew. The five-star, on board experience is enhanced by the five-star service. Without exception the Etihad Airways staff we interacted with, cabin crew and ground staff, matched warmth and friendliness with efficiency.

For most of us airline travel is more and

more stressful, especially since 9/11 and the restrictions on liquids. While airlines have been working hard to enhance experiences on board, airports seem to have gone the other way, with long queues for bag drop and security, and long, meandering routes through shopping malls and high-priced fast food outlets to get to the gate with sparse and uncomfortable seating while you wait to board.

I have always opted for the shortest possible flying time at the best price point when choosing an airline to fly with. But what if the journey was part of the holiday experience or, heaven forbid, the holiday itself. The future of airlines is often the stuff of fantasies but it is getting closer and closer – The Residence is testament to that. It would be quite something to get to the point where you wanted longer time on the plane rather than the shortest possible – a cruise in the sky perhaps. Experiencing The Residence convinced me that it is perfectly possible in the future that our experience of flying could be enhanced to the point where instead of clapping at touchdown we would be ruefully ending a beautiful vacation in the sky. If any airline could convince me to spend more, rather than less time, flying between destinations it is Etihad Airways. I can tell you myself and Dara were very reluctant to leave our beautiful haven of tranquillity on board. ■

Etihad fly twice daily from Dublin to Abu Dhabi and to over 100 destinations around the world. The Residence is available on Etihad Airways A380 services between Abu Dhabi and London Heathrow (it started on December 27) and as of 1 June 2015 on the Abu Dhabi to Sydney route. From December 2015, the service will be available between Abu Dhabi and New York.

MILESTONES IN AVIATION

There have been key moments in the history of air travel, from Leonardo da Vinci's illustration of the “flying machine”, to the first engine powered flight in 1903 by Orville and Wilbur Wright. Then we had decades of “firsts”. The first non-stop transatlantic flight by Alcock and Brown from St Johns in Newfoundland to Clifton in Galway. In 1932 Emilia Earhart became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic – again from Newfoundland but landing in Derry. The first kitchen appeared on an airplane in 1936 so passengers could enjoy the luxury of food and a hot drink. As more commercial airlines came on stream in a highly competitive market the key differentiators were more to do with flying time with passengers opting for non-stop and faster carriers. The first supersonic airline arrived with Concorde in 1976 and it seemed that with the ease of a taxi service you could travel from Paris or London to New York in three and a half hours, half the time of a conventional aircraft. In more recent times, price has been a significant driver, opening up airline travel and new destinations to the masses. Developments on comfort and luxury have been much slower. British Airways introduced the first flat beds in business, Virgin Atlantic led the charge towards premium economy – somewhere between economy and business. Flatbeds are now the norm in business class and most airlines offer an enhanced economy seat. Over the past year in particular most of the major airlines have transformed their first class and business offerings creating more personal space, adding designer names to personal amenities and Michelin star chefs to their food offering. Business passengers may only amount to 12 per cent of the overall passenger numbers but they account for twice the profits and as high as 75 per cent of the profits on some airline routes. But none are close to The Residence in terms of comfort, privacy and style. It's in a class of its own.

Etihad's The Residence is also about price but at an entirely different end of the scale. It is a bold move towards the uber luxurious end of the market, into the space previously the sole preserve of private, chartered airplane companies, wealthy plane owners, heads of state, minor royalty, big business leaders and celebrities. The Residence has far superior facilities to a charter and offers this elite passenger group the privacy, luxury and ease of travel for a fraction of the cost. To us mere mortals the idea of splashing out €32,000 for a round trip to Abu Dhabi seems incredulous but to put it into context, the cost of flying the Government's Lear jet is currently €4,200 per hour, so the same round trip costs us nearly twice as much at €63,000.