WHERE IS EVERYONE?

News / Airlines



The A380 superjumbo that flew almost empty.

I thought the days of chancing a half-empty international flight were grounded for good once computers replaced humans in making sure aeroplane seats were filled.

But the gods who look after economy passengers smiled down on us on Wednesday last week when Qantas flight QF93 developed a bit of tummy trouble, putting its 9.30am departure from Melbourne to Los Angeles back to 7.30 that night.

Once those who absolutely had to be in LA that morning (don't you love how you arrive in the States several hours 'before' you depart) had been offloaded onto other flights, the possible maximum load of 484 passengers on the A380 had been whittled down to a mere 60 or so of us happy to wear the delay.

Now 60 out of 484 is bad maths, but with a full load of passengers booked on the superjumbo's return flight from the US, Qantas decided the show must go on. And didn't we make the most of it.

The penny hadn't dropped for us when the check-in clerk at Tullamarine moved my companion one seat across to give us each "a bit more room because the plane's a bit light on tonight". It still hadn't dropped when we were through security, then immigration, in three minutes, nor when we seemed to be the only ones in duty free taking a free blast of cologne.

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But it absolutely clanged at the gate lounge where, half an hour before official boarding, we arrived to find at best a few dozen people when normally, for an A380, it's standing room only.

There were more Qantas crew than passengers coming down the escalator, and when the boarding call came, there was no white line fever-infused free-for-all usually seen at these times; we strolled on board with an air of civilised nonchalance.

Thus we found ourselves, two among 10 in a sector that would seat 100. There was a full crew on board and the safety demonstration was conducted with full gravitas, and we paid attention; it would have been bleeding obvious if we hadn't.

The funny thing was that the actual flight was almost a blur. Minus around 33,000kg of human ballast, there was no perceptible sensation of taking off, nor were there the usual annoyances that fill the letters section of travel sites: seat-back positions, unsupervised children and the protocols of raising/lowering the window shades. I could take anti-DVT strolls through the cabin without the fear of tripping over sleeping legs stuck out into the aisle, because everyone asleep was stretched out on their private row of four seats. Granted, the arm rests wouldn't remain upright, which made maintaining a decorous sleeping position impossible, but it meant my neck pillow never had to leave the bag.

And this was one flight that was never going to run out of your choice of food. I had two servings of a delicious beef pie, and it seemed churlish to bother the crew, who I think were enjoying the relaxed atmosphere as much as we. So I found where they kept the basket of Tim Tams and helped myself. Once. Maybe twice.

We landed on time in LA and it was back to reality. Hand prints, thumb prints and just knowing that the immigration officer doesn't have a sense of humour, even when he fakes an Australian accent with us.

The scales were tipped back to the surreal side by a final act of Qantas generosity. It would have been understandable if they had kept us several dozen economy passengers in one sector, saving cleaning, maintenance etc on the rest of the cabin. But they gave us the run of the place, and when we arrived at the luggage carousel there stood a Qantas ground staff member with everyone's bags lined up neatly for immediate rolling away.

So thank you, Qantas, you may have cured me of business class envy for life.

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