

THE JOY OF FLYING

By: **DERWIN PEREIRA**



Like every other child, I think, I used to look up to the skies whenever school or homework proved too much for me. During school recess or outdoor games near my home, the unknown skies were a sanctuary for my eyes, tired at the sight of the world and what it does to the childhood imagination: crush it under the weight of life patterns imposed by adults and repeated ad nauseam, like boring lessons being played constantly on the same gramophone record. What would it be like to live in the skies instead, I wondered, where I would be free of the laws of gravity that tether children to the horrible realm of adults? It seemed to be a good idea till it occurred to me that only beings who are divine and humans who are the dead (or yet unborn) live in the skies. The prospect was not an inviting one, therefore. The next best prospect was to fly through the skies alive. People did that all the time, and in planes that I saw flying overhead. I wanted to fly.

How I wanted to fly! I wanted to touch the passing clouds with my bare hands. I wanted to kiss the beautiful ways in which they turn shape and form into delights for the eyes. I wanted to be with the rain clouds before they let go of their pregnant cargo so that it could fall to earth and nourish fields that yield food for woman and man. I wanted to fly through space so that I could leave time behind. I wanted to fly into a new me. That was not possible, of course.

Then there is no surprise that the first job I applied for after graduating from the London School of Economics in 1991 was to be a Cabin Crew on Singapore Airlines. Unfortunately, SIA had other plans for me. They wanted me to enter their corporate world. I said no. I wanted to fly. They said no. And I moved on to the Ministry of Defence in Singapore and then The Straits Times before venturing into the muddy world of business in far flung continents of the world.

Decades later my childhood returns to me every time I board an aircraft, whether it is a Boeing 737, 777-ER, Airbus 350 or 380. I become a triumphalist advocate for



science, which has produced planes that can beat gravity for not just a moment or two (which we can do by jumping) but for hours on end. When the plane takes off, it takes my imagination with it. At 37,000 feet above ground, I am 37,000 feet closer to the skies (which, we all know, is an optical illusion but which nevertheless remains an iconic metaphor for the desire for freedom). Space travel is even more exciting, but I have no pressing business or personal reasons for visiting anyone on Mars, should that anyone in fact exist. Things would change should humans colonise space in the same way as they have colonised the Earth. Intergalactic travel would then become the norm – although an expensive one – and I would be able to visit lands that are yet unknown to man. But that possibility lies far ahead of my comprehension, which is anchored in the here and now. In another life, I would want to be an astronaut like the Hollywood megastar Tom Hanks in the movie Apollo 11 but hopefully with a mission that is successful.

Hence, my joy of flying is that of flying on airlines. To make a confession, there is something delightfully privileged about enjoying chicken satay – those perfectly-grilled chicken skewers served with creamy peanut sauce – along with a heady gin-and-tonic thousands of feet above the ground. The combination is unbeatable as well back on earth below, but it is a miracle of food technology that the chicken remains so tender and juicy and the calorie-induced sauce so compellingly complementary with it as the plane continues to beat the laws of gravity at amazing speeds.

Needless to add, the culinary offerings on Singapore Airlines enjoy pride of place in my culinary ordering of life aboard an aircraft. Food is only a small part of SIA, though. The ceaseless professionalism of its staff – and the joy of fleeting glimpses of beautiful girls (but grossly overworked) in their blue, green, red and purple kebayas handcrafted to near perfection to show their almost perfect silhouettes – embodies Singapore’s ability to be a global city in spite of its small size and population and the near-absence of natural resources. It is surreal. If anything, SIA is Singapore itself writ large in the skies. It is still the best airline in the world. I am not sure if they know it, as much as they did many years ago when a famous man in Singapore once told me that SIA is a porcelain bowl.

On a visit to a foreign nation last month, the leader of that country asked me: “How did Singapore build a world class airline? It is 10-stars. We want to know your formula for success.” I replied recruiting the best, good corporate governance and high salaries to remain in the stars. You pay peanuts, you get monkeys. It then dawned on me after that meeting that I should have perhaps accepted the chance that Singapore Airlines offered so graciously to me in 1991 to go into the corporate world. Maybe it was my innocence of youth then. But life takes strange turns. And mine, perhaps, for the better. I did not end up being a Henry Sugiarto, Vish, Jeremy, Colin, Kevin Lee, Nicholas Leong, Leanne Koh, or Matilda, Gerard Ee, Covan or June Howe, and many

others, all of whom are supremely brilliant Station Managers and IFMs, the bedrock of SQ. They make Singapore so proud.

Perhaps, it is fate where I landed. As I age – although this is something that I consider a blessing and not a bane because it means I am alive – my childhood skies darken over me. The sense of wonder with which I once greeted the skies is receding. I am not the intelligent and mischievous child that I was at 10. I am now one with the ways of the world, with the gravitas of its accumulated economic and scientific knowledge, with the difficult yet rewarding path laid ahead for me by my beautiful faith, which I cherish because it sustains me in and beyond time. But I still love to defy gravity by looking up to the skies and waiting for them to come down to me. When they do not descend to greet my waiting arms, I fly up to them, whether in my mind or on an aircraft.

My mind always wonders but it does not wander for long. Flying on a plane takes me to places and brings me back home to Singapore and myself.

It is a new me, back after a voyage into what lies beyond me.

The writer is Founder and CEO of Pereira International, a Singapore-based political and strategic advisory consulting firm. An award-winning journalist and a graduate alumnus of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, he is also a member of the Board of International Councillors at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC. This article reflects the writer’s personal views.