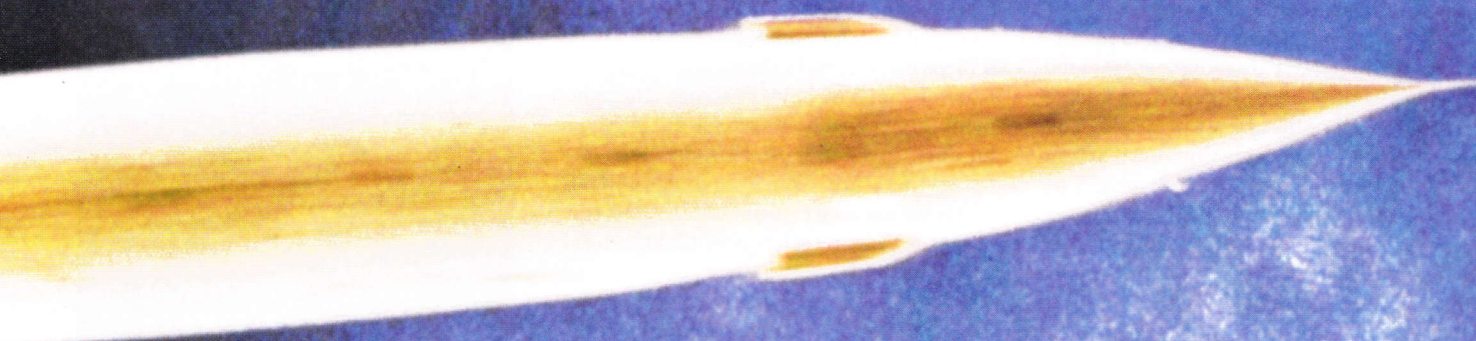


WHOOSH

WHEN IT FLIES OVERHEAD, YOU STILL POINT, YOU STILL MARVEL
CONCORDE MAY BE APPROACHING ITS QUARTER CENTURY BUT AS
EXPERIENCES GO, IT'S STILL RIGHT UP THERE WITH THE GREATS

BY PHILIP WATSON

I couldn't sleep the night before. Not since I headed off on a school football tour at the age of 12 had I felt such restless excitement. Flying Concorde had been a travel ambition since the plane made its first commercial flight in 1976; together with my dad's collection of *National Geographic* magazines it was a major part of the reason I became interested in travelling in the first place. Concorde seemed to embody all travel's mystery and romance. And it embodied its future. The prospect of finally being on board, flying on the edge of space at





twice the speed of sound, was enough to bring back the unfettered boy within.

The first things that strike you are the aircraft's size and shape. Looking out from the windows of the Concorde departure lounge the plane seems almost a sly presence. You notice the shady eyes looking down at you from above the long, aristocratic nose. The body is slim, sleek and snake-like; yet it seems undiminished by the bloated jumbos that surround it. Concorde has an actorly presence and supermodel looks – it is, after all, the star of any airport runway. Concorde somehow exudes confidence.

You also cannot fail to notice that the aircraft is relatively cramped inside. Most passengers stoop to enter the cabin and have to climb gymnastically into the window seats. Concorde's padded leather seats are closer to a sports car trim; they have rounded backs and are snug fitting. You half reach up to attach the safety belt from above your shoulder, not from across your waist. And unless you count the constant supplies of vintage wines and champagnes, and the

gourmet food (oh, and the free gifts), there is little in the way of in-flight entertainment. Concorde has no multi-channel television screens embedded in the back of the seat in front of you. The only on-screen entertainment is provided by four read-outs – Mach number, speed in mph, altitude and external temperature. Concorde is also considerably noisier than conventional aircraft and, because of fuel transfers mid-flight, can get a little hot and smelly at the back.

There are, of course, major compensations. The take-off, for example, catapults you into the air like a missile; you feel closer to the ground and there is none of the lumbering, elephantine acceleration you get with wide-bodied aircraft. Concorde takes off at 250mph – your ears pop and you feel a seat-pinning pressure in the small of your back. You feel thrust. It's like being in an elongated Formula One car. You're in the sky and climbing fast, before you've had chance to settle in your seat.

And then there is the whole Seventies-meets-the-Space-Age thrill of the flight.

Concorde has had a recent refit in plush shades of fashionable grey, yet there is still something pleasingly retro about the interior. Go to the flight deck and you'll see control panels that seem like they've been lifted from an early hi-fi system; everywhere you look there are knobs, dials and switches. Around you are play-boy sports stars, peroxide bombshells and elderly couples who've dressed up for the flight-of-a-lifetime. Even the stewards seem camper than usual; my man acts as if he's just stepped out of the John



21 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT CONCORDE

1. During flights it stretches by up to nine inches.
2. At cruising speed of Mach 2 (1,336mph) Concorde covers a mile every 2.5sec.
3. The friction of air against Concorde's pointed nose creates a surface temperature of 130°C.
4. Concorde pilots only fly Concorde, no other planes.
5. The average flying time to New York is 3hr 30min; a 777 takes 7hr 30min. Concorde's fastest transatlantic crossing time is 2hr 53min.
6. Supersonic speed means you can visit New York or Barbados for the day. The ultimate Caribbean day trip leaves Heathrow at 9.30am, and allows a couple of hours or so for gulping down rum punches and swimming in the Caribbean, before flying back to arrive home at 8pm. The return fare is £6,118 plus taxes. The New York fare is £5,750.
7. A 1997 phone competition to win Concorde tickets to New York for only £10 ran up 30 million attempted calls to the BA switchboard in just three hours. Two million came from abroad.
8. Supermodels say they prefer to fly Concorde because it's better for their skin. The cabin pressure is lower at an equivalent of 5,500ft – not 8,500ft as in conventional aircraft – thereby reducing dehydration, body stress and jet lag.
9. Concorde has just 100 seats, in two rows of two either side of the aisle.
10. Concorde uses a "reheat" system to shoot it through the sound barrier. This is an afterburner system which adds extra fuel and thrust to the four Rolls-Royce ➡

CONCORDE PUTS YOU IN TOUCH WITH A TIME THAT WAS MORE INNOCENT. CONCORDE IS A VISION OF THE FUTURE ROOTED IN THE PAST

Inman *Are You Being Served?* school of customer relations.

I find early episodes of *Star Trek* flashing through my mind, quickly followed by scenes from *The Right Stuff*, *Space 1999* and *Tomorrow's World*. I think about model aircraft kits, Look & Learn books and the timeless beauty of the E-type Jag. The soundtrack in my head jumps from *Dark Side of the Moon* and Kraftwerk's *Autobahn* to George Clinton's P. Funk. Concorde puts you in touch with a time that was more innocent and wide-eyed. Concorde is a vision of the future rooted in the past.

At cruising altitudes approaching 60,000ft (that's more than 11 miles high) you can look through the tiny jet windows and see the curve of the earth. Above you is the deep indigo immensity of space; below are the turbulence, cloud formations and weather systems that hinder normal aircraft. You occasionally spot speck-like planes flying 25,000ft beneath you – they look stationary, like eagles drifting on the wing.

You are flying in the domain of spacemen

and fighter pilots, yet many aboard my flight seem curiously unmoved. There is a certain monied sheen and nonchalance to your average Concorde passenger that communicates the message that many have flown supersonically before. These are the passengers who read the *FT* during take-off and fall asleep after their eggs benedict and glass of Chablis Grand Cru. They seem as bored and blasé as commuters on the 7.47 to King's Cross.

Some are more impressed. The guy sitting next to me, a fellow Concorde freshman, is so amazed by the racing read-outs that he insists on keeping me continually abreast of our speed. "One... thousand... miles... an... hour! One... thousand... miles... an... hour!" he chants rhythmically when we reach Mach 1.5. Others (OK, including me) abandon all pretence of sophistication and have the captain sign a special supersonic certificate.

As we approach Barbados, I can see children on the ground obeying the first law of Concorde-spotting: point skywards. Cars

➔ Turbo Jet engines.

11. The so-called "Concorde Club" is an elite list of the 30,000 or so repeat fliers who regularly travel the London-New York transatlantic route. Members include Rupert Murdoch, Charles Saatchi, Luciano Pavarotti, Woody Allen, Prince Charles, Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, along with various chairmen, CEOs and managing directors of leading banks, legal firms and large corporations. Current Cabinet Office minister Dr Jack Cunningham has also been known

pilots' visibility during taxiing and on landing.
15. Passengers are presented with Concorde gifts which include "Mach 2" keyrings, silver picture frames and address books, along with Concorde stationery, luggage tags and postcards.
16. Concorde is the only supersonic passenger aircraft in the world.
17. There are 14 Concorde. BA has seven and Air France five (it cannibalises the other two for parts).
18. On board, wines are served in crystal glasses and meals on Royal Doulton china.



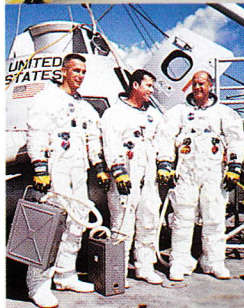
to take the New York shuttle.
12. TV interviewer and producer David Frost has flown Concorde more than 300 times.
13. In 1993, French businessman Emmanuel Lupe chartered an Air France Concorde to fly friends and journalists from Paris to Indianapolis to watch the Indy 500. Lupe's company, Formula Project, was the sponsor of French driver Stephan Gregoire's team. L'addition? £250,000.
14. The characteristic tapered nose is lowered to improve

19. The London to New York flight is numbered BA001; the return is BA002.
20. Concorde's maximum range of 4,000 miles means that it cannot cross the Pacific without stopping to refuel.
21. The Concorde in-flight shopping guide quotes from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. It reads: "In order to possess one must first have desired."



SPEED THRILLS (MPH)

- 4** London traffic (during rush hour)
- 27** Human (well, Donovan Bailey)
- 43** Big Racket (fastest horse Mexico, 1945)
- 60** Cheetah (fastest land mammal)
- 78** Roger Hickey (fastest skateboarder, USA)
- 100** Superman: The Escape (fastest rollercoaster)
- 124** Peregrine falcon (fastest living creature)
- 230** McLaren F1 (fastest production road car)
- 318** Spirit of Australia (fastest powerboat)
- 320** French TGV (fastest train)
- 322** Easyriders (fastest motorbike)
- 433** Speed-O-Motive/Spirit of 76 (fastest wheel-driven car)
- 500** Maglev (experimental magnetic levitation train)
- 763** Thrust SSC (fastest land vehicle)
- 1,450** Concorde (Mach 2.2)
- 2,110** Soviet Mikoyan MiG-25 fighter (fastest combat jet)
- 2,193** Lockheed SR-71A "Blackbird" (USAF reconnaissance aircraft)
- 24,791** Apollo 10 (fastest speed a human has ever travelled)
- 158,000** NASA-German Helios A and Helios B solar probes (fastest rocket)



THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF SUPERSONIC TRAVEL

British Airways is fond of claiming that Concorde is "the past, present and future of supersonic travel". Spokesmen will tell you that, because the plane is so meticulously maintained and flies fewer hours than conventional aircraft, it is guaranteed to be in service for another 10 years. BA says it is "the strongest possibility" that Concorde will be flying for another 25 years, and "not unfeasible" that it could go on for 50.

BA's problem, however, is twofold: Concorde is more a premium flagship than a commercial venture; and at present there are no concrete plans for its replacement. While projects have been funded in Europe, the US and Japan, the future development of supersonic passenger planes is hindered by enormous start-up costs (it has been estimated that, at

today's prices, Concorde would cost the British and French governments £10 billion each) and by ever-increasing concerns about environmental damage. Because of noise and pollution levels, Concorde is only permitted to fly supersonically over oceans and deserts.

Several manufacturers have proposed developing a smaller, 15-seat supersonic business jet. Much more likely, however, is the introduction of the exact opposite: a super-large subsonic jumbo that can carry up to 800 people. Either way, Concorde's successor looks a very long way off. The message is clear; save up and fly supersonic while you still can.

and bicycles are parked around the airport perimeter; hundreds of spectators have come to greet the plane on its first weekly visit of the season. Officials and dignitaries are waiting for us, including the Governor General; there are reporters and cameramen. It's as if the Queen herself is in town.

Before entering the terminal, I take one last look back at her across the Tarmac, basking in the blueish early Caribbean sunlight – and then down at my watch. The flight has taken just 3hr 41min; because of the time difference, we've arrived 19 minutes before taking off at Heathrow.

"Concorde is a time machine, a romantic ideal, and the ultimate in civil aviation," says Captain Andy Mills when I meet up with him the next day. "Nothing else even comes close." He's right. Nothing does. Concorde is the ride of your life.

So, how much does it cost?

You will need at least £695 to fly supersonic. Goodwood Travel (01227 763 336) produces a dedicated brochure which details charter flights on Concorde. Entry-level, 1hr 40min "champagne flights" head out to the Bay of Biscay and back; other highlights include weekends in Paris (from £795) and Prague (from £995), Egypt and the Pyramids (from £1,375) and Greenland for the midnight sun (£2,650). Most desirable of all is the Monaco Grand Prix excursion (Concorde out, back on the Orient Express, from £1,895). British Airways Holidays (0870 242 4245) and Superlative Travel (0181 992 6991) also offer Concorde trips. Elegant Resorts (01244 350 408) is best for trips to Barbados; it offers one-way Concorde supplements from £880, if you book a minimum six-night stay. Or why not charter the whole plane? Get 100 mates/colleagues/pub regulars together and Concorde can be exclusively yours. Prices on application; call 0181 513 0202 for details.

Finally, a remote taste of the Concorde experience can be had for a mere £29.95: Intelligent Television and Video (01723 500 767) produces a specialist five-hour video, including flight-deck views of a return journey from Heathrow to New York. **3**