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The first Airbus A380 delivered to Singapore International Airlines on Thursday has twelve private "suites" created by the French yacht designer Jean-Jacques Coste. (Lionel Bonaventure/Agence France-Presse)

Airbus delivers its first A380 superjumbo to Singapore Airlines

By Nicola Clark

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TOULOUSE, France: There were no Jacuzzis or bowling alleys. No casinos or gyms. But the chilled bottle of Champagne perched on an elegantly laid-out double bed said it all.

Singapore Airlines showed off the interior of its first A380 superjumbo jet in an elaborate ceremony here Monday, bringing an end to a decade of anticipation of what the airline has always said would be a step up in the level of quality and comfort in long-haul air travel.

"From today, there is a new queen of the skies for air travel," a beaming Chew Choon Seng, the Singapore Airlines chief executive, told a gathering of more than 500 international guests. And with that, Chew introduced the unique features of his carrier's new 471-seat craft, which, in the premium-class cabin at least, sometimes resembles a luxury hotel rather than an airliner.

Twelve private "suites" created by the French yacht designer Jean-Jacques Coste grace the front half of the plane's lower deck. Designed to maximize privacy, these partitioned nooks are each fitted with fully adjustable leather seats and a separate bed that folds out with a full-sized mattress, draped in crisp cream-colored linens designed by Givenchy.

A 58 centimeter, or 23 inch, LCD video screen hangs on one wall, where passengers can view a selection of up to 100 movies and more than 180 television channels. The same entertainment system includes a word processor and spreadsheet programs as well as multiplayer 3D video games.

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As if to enhance the already high expectations of his audience, Chew explained that four of the suites in the center of the cabin could be modified to become double beds for couples traveling together, simply by removing the privacy divider between them.

In a demure hint at the plane's honeymoon possibilities, the carrier had decked out one double bed with champagne and scattered red rose petals on the duvet. The bed's two seatbelts were discreetly hidden below the bedding.

Officially, of course, these beds are meant for sleeping only.

"We look forward to welcoming our premium-class guests for the purposes of travel and rest," said Stephen Forshaw, an airline spokesman. "That is all."

On the upper deck are 60 business-class seats, each 86 centimeters wide. These, too, convert into a fully flat bed and include 39-centimeter LCD television screens, USB ports and in-seat power supplies for laptop computers.

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The 399 economy-class seats spread across the back half of the upper and lower decks of the plane are designed to maximize leg and knee room. Each seatback is equipped with a 27-centimeter video screen, USB port and electrical power port for laptops can be found in the armrests.

First- and business-class restrooms are roomy and feature shaving mirrors and an assortment of fine complimentary toiletries. But Forshaw said the airline chose, for practical reasons, to forego installing showers, which some rival airlines have said they would include. "The main reason is because it would require us to carry too much water, which is just too heavy to be economical," he said.

As guests marveled at the opulent interiors of the plane, which makes its first passenger flight on Oct. 25, the festivities were also an occasion for the plane's beleaguered manufacturer, Airbus, to revel in a brief moment of celebration following nearly two years of corporate upheaval linked to the A380's highly publicized manufacturing delays that will cost Airbus nearly €5 billion, or \$7.1 billion, in lost profit between 2006 and 2010.

Thomas Enders, the Airbus chief executive, seemed to welcome the opportunity to change the subject from reports of a widening insider-trading investigation that has ensnared him personally as well as 20 other current and former executives of Airbus and its parent, European Aeronautic Defense & Space. The inquiry by French stock market regulators, comes as Airbus is struggling to implement a huge corporate turnaround plan that foresees around 10,000 job cuts and the sale of as many as seven factories over the next four years.

"Today is an important milestone on a four-year recovery program," Enders said. Already two years late and 50 percent over its initial \$12 billion budget, Enders acknowledged that significant challenges remain for Airbus as it prepares to deliver the next 13 superjumbos to airline customers next year, followed by a near doubling of production to 25 craft a year in 2009. It plans to build 45 a year by the end of 2010.

Still, Enders said he was confident that Airbus would be up to the task.

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