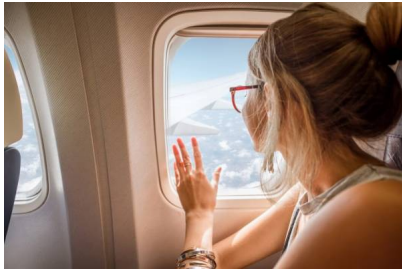


AIRLINES FUELED THE DESIRE TO FLY WITH INNOVATIVE IDEAS



During the Corona pandemic, when air travel worldwide came to a standstill, the desire to fly took on bizarre forms. From sightseeing flights for Buddhists to dating trips for singles, airlines came up with the craziest concepts to keep passengers happy.

What people are not allowed to do, they desire the most. And during the pandemic, people were not allowed to travel in many countries of the world. Sometimes not even within their own country, in most cases at least not to other countries, even to directly neighboring states.

The flight is probably the most uncomfortable part of a trip. But it is the most achievable substitute for the feeling of freedom of being able to go somewhere else.

This desire to fly was recognized by some airlines, whose activities had almost come to a complete standstill in many parts of the world. They, too, desperately needed sales, some kind of revenue. At the same time, at least a core of employees in flight operations and on board had to be kept active.

Sightseeing Flights with Singles on Board

That there was a symbiosis here, a great demand eagerly awaiting offers, quickly became apparent after a few months, especially in Asia and Australia. Out of necessity, a kind of pop-up market emerged in the late summer of 2020 after months of the pandemic and an off-peak travel season: round-trip flights with and without a theme and all kinds of offers on the ground to satisfy customers' longing to fly.

Because many people couldn't or didn't want to fly during the pandemic, many briefly romanticized the experience and the public turned to activities that recreated some parts of it.

Asian airlines, in particular, could hardly escape the demand - when Japan's ANA, for example, offered a 90-minute round-trip flight themed "Hawaii" - where it usually flies Japanese tourists by the thousands - there were more than 50,000 interested parties online for the 330 seats.

The genre is also booming in Australia with Qantas, as it is on Taiwan. This is also where the first unusual ideas for the so-called "flights to nowhere" came from: a round trip for Father's Day with an Airbus A330 in "Hello Kitty" special livery, and later a dating flight under the motto "Love Is in the Air".

Each of the three-hour flights had about 20 male and 20 female singles (men between 28 and 38, women between 24 and 35) on board, all of whom had at least a university degree. Each of the participants was assigned a "seat buddy" of the opposite sex in hopes of sparking high above Taiwan or Japan's Ryukyu Islands. For just under 300 euros and a gourmet in-flight meal for many Taiwanese singles, this was a tempting offer and a welcome change of pace in the pandemic.

Singing on a Flight over Sacred Sites in Thailand

Tigerair Taiwan tried the so-called "no-landing travel" and the Korean theme, showing passengers

the popular South Korean vacation island of Jeju from the air, serving Korean food by flight attendants in national costume and even teaching a few words of the local dialect.

Thai Airways had a completely different target group in mind with its offer of a Buddhist pilgrimage flight. The three-hour round trip flight took passengers from Bangkok to 99 sacred Buddhist sites in 31 provinces of Thailand, and all participants received a prayer book and religious amulets specially compiled for the flight.

Under the guidance of the "celebrated fortune teller and expert for religion history Dr. Khata Chinbunchon" the passengers should pass the time with the chanting of Buddhist Mantras while flying over the holy places. To that end, Thai Airways' sales chief announced, "passengers on board would receive positive energy from the chanting." Fares were around 200 euros in economy and 300 euros in business class.

"Mystery Flights" by Qantas in Australia.

No one, however, can hold a candle to Australia's Qantas when it comes to inventing creative round-trip flight products. The seven-hour sightseeing flight in a Boeing 787 from Sydney via the popular seaside resort of Byron Bay, then to the Great Barrier Reef and, the highlight, to the red rock Uluru in the middle of the outback of the fifth continent, which has been completely sealed off from the rest of the world like no other region on earth since the outbreak of the pandemic.

Australians are used to long-haul flights, some missed them very much, the 150 seats were sold out within ten minutes at prices between 787 and 3787 Australian dollars (about 500-2400 euros).

Then Qantas went on blithely with unusual flight offers from/to Australia, bookable only for Australians: 14-hour round trips over Antarctica and, for the first time, ten-hour flight missions to subantarctic regions in darkness on the trail of the green light cascades of the Aurora Australis, the south polar counterpart of the northern lights.

Then, in May 2021, Qantas launched the "supermoon round trip," which shone on the same night, of all nights, that a total lunar eclipse briefly obscured the Earth's satellite. A good hundred tickets for the three-hour tour were sold out in two and a half minutes.

Trips to seafood lunches in the Whitsunday Islands, sold as "mystery flights" where the destination was not known beforehand, also had great success. "We are totally overwhelmed by the popularity of our special flights," a spokeswoman said.

A380 Flights Well Booked in Japan and Korea

For airlines, it is not just revenue that is important, but also the customer contact and brand awareness at a time when only domestic flights can take place. Similarly, in Japan and Korea, the airlines even offered regular sightseeing flights in their otherwise parked flagships, the Airbus A380, which also enjoyed great popularity and were well booked for weeks at flight prices between 260 and 780 euros.

A crisis is actually a good time for airlines to remain visible with smart marketing. Especially for the post-pandemic period, this is an important positioning, and also psychologically clever, in order to score points with customers by fulfilling their longing for flights that are otherwise just barely possible.

Europe and America, on the other hand, completely missed out on this trend. This may be mainly

due to the fact that lockdowns there are not as tough as in many Asian countries, where "getting out and about" plays an even greater role. Of course, it is also due to greater environmental awareness, which makes flights just for fun, but at the expense of the atmosphere, seem less desirable.

Singapore Airlines Turned Airplanes into Restaurants

In Asia, this was not an issue at all, but it was in Australia, where Qantas emphasized that it would compensate for any CO2 emissions with offsetting payments, and environmentalists criticized it, but this did not prevent the run-on flights. While most of the dozens of airlines in large countries like the U.S. enjoy little prestige, in many Asian countries in particular, the citizens' identification with and pride in their national airline is very deep-rooted.

This was demonstrated, for example, by Singapore Airlines - the only major Asian airline to completely forego the planned sightseeing flights, but instead used its flagships as stationary restaurants at Changi Airport on several weekends: "RestaurantA380@Changi" was the name of the offer, at prices ranging from about 32 euros in Economy Class to 400 euros (for a suite of one's own), those interested could enjoy in-flight service on the ground, with a complete menu and in-flight entertainment. Here, too, all dates were sold out in half an hour in each case.

Thai Airways was also innovative on the ground: the company converted the corporate cafeteria of its catering subsidiary into a pop-up restaurant complete with aircraft seats, which immediately became a popular offering, even if only economy meals were served here.

Thai Airways also made a profit from its underemployed flight simulators: for the equivalent of around 500 euros, two people were allowed to "fly" in the real cockpit for half an hour with instructions.

Singapore Airlines also offered the city-state's public access to simulators and offered cabin crew training workshops and "Singapore Girl grooming workshops" - where women could learn how to get the look of an SIA flight attendant. Singaporeans could also choose from seven business-class menus and have them delivered to their homes, served by real flight attendants.

Flight over Chernobyl in Ukraine

Probably the only special flight offer during the pandemic in Europe was in Ukraine: **a trip to mark the 35th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster started at Kiev-Borispol Airport on April 25, 2021.** For this, Ukraine International Airlines offered a low altitude sightseeing flight over the disaster reactor hidden under a huge steel sarcophagus.

"I admit, this was only possible because of the pandemic," said Bohdan Skotnykov, project manager for the special flight. "First, it made aircraft available, and second, it gave our team time to devote to such creative special projects." So, it came to the paradoxical situation of being able to view from above the remnants of another disaster, the 1986 nuclear meltdown, due to a current global catastrophe, the pandemic.

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