

IMAGE, STYLE, DESIGN

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Now Boarding: Luxury Travel

THE STYLISH TRAVEL EXPERIENCE WENT TO THE WAYSIDE WITH THE DEATH OF PAN AM—OR DID IT?

Glamour. Grandeur. Jet set. Luxury.

All of these words once described the culture associated with airline travel in the 1950s through the '70s, back when “stewardesses” wore sophisticatedly sexy (and perfectly tailored) uniforms, and a pilot’s job was not that unlike the swanky, martini-laden lifestyle of Hollywood stars. Comparable to a 007 of the sky, minus the gunfire and espionage (though the TV series *Pan Am* would lead you to believe that spy duties really did exist as a part of the job description), a jet-setter’s life was the epitome of style and class. From luxury airport terminals to the cutting-edge jumbo jets, every inch of the travel experience was doused in high design. Even passengers were expected to look the part. It was an unspoken but widely known rule that women should arrive in a skirt or dress, while men were expected to don the ever-dapper suit.

But living in a post-9/11 world, it’s no surprise that this partnership between travel and luxury had to take a necessary backseat to larger, more important issues. Security, the economy, and high oil and gas prices all took precedence over the need to maintain a high level of aesthetic interest for travelers. No shoes, no liquids, no need to be concerned about how you look, especially when the TSA will have you remove nearly everything but your underwear, then scan you through a life-size X-ray machine to see through that, too. With all the hassle associated with modern air travel, it is no wonder that so many of our fellow passengers show up appearing as if they just rolled out of bed.

As times have changed and more importance has been placed on security, the travel industry has gone from glamour to utility, and many feel fed up with paying more money for a lesser experience. At one time, the well-designed travel experience gave passengers a self-image of importance and worldliness, but now it’s been replaced by a feeling of being lost in a herd, and this reflects poorly on the self-image of today’s jet-setter.

But the glimmer of hope for a well-designed trip isn’t gone just yet, thanks to style-savvy



changes that are poised for a return to the golden age of travel. There have been interesting developments in the world of private jets—though the luxury of bypassing the invasive security screening process will still cost you, it won’t be as much as it has been in the past. Companies like NetJets are allowing people to buy single seats on flights that aren’t full, and at prices that rival a coach ticket on a commercial airline to the same destination. Commercial liners aren’t missing out on the style revival either. New plane redesigns put a premium on design and comfort, including Airbus’ new A380 plane, which features private compartments and lounge areas, not unlike train sleeper cars from journeys of yore. And Boeing’s new Dreamliner features blue ambient ceiling lighting to allow the traveler to feel as if the sky is just above them. Design-conscious details like this have helped to recapture some of the lost excitement of air travel.

The fashion department is also kicking it up a notch. United Airlines hired fashion

designer Cynthia Rowley to create smart, new uniforms for its flight crew, following in the footsteps of other designer airline outfits by Kate Spade and Richard Tyler. And with the renewed interest in jet-set glam extending beyond travel to the world of fashion and even furniture design—as evidenced in the renewed focus on mid-century modern pieces—people can’t get enough of this bygone era of style.

As airlines work to renew the stylish travel experience that was lost along the way, will the flying public up its game as well? Perhaps an airline-instituted passenger dress code can class things up to standards from the past? Although it’s not likely that such a regulation will be coming anytime soon, with a renewed spirit for glamorous travel in pop culture and improvements being made on the industry side, the return of the grand experience is not out of reach.

But you still may need to take your shoes off before entering the terminal. ✎