

60,000 FEET UP and Climbing

By Marilyn Litvak

Lately there's been lots of discussion about the average person being allowed, if they can afford it, to travel into space. I say go for it.

Nothing can be more exciting than viewing planet Earth from high up in the stratosphere.

My opportunity came aboard an Air France Concorde flight as it made its way from New York's JFK Airport to Paris. This thrilling and awe inspiring experience had me viewing the curve of the Earth from some 60,000 feet above terra firma while travelling at a speed over Mach 2.

The Concorde, as you may remember, was a supersonic aircraft that saw service beginning in the 1970's thru 2003. The plane flew at speeds the equivalent of 1,300 mph—almost tripling the normal speed of a jet passenger plane. This resulted in greatly reducing the travel time between a departure and destination city.

In 1990, I was a member of a travel agent group about to experience this thrill. None of us had flown on such a craft before. And we were all eagerly awaiting the boarding announcement.

As we proceeded toward the departure gate at Kennedy Airport, we caught a glimpse out the window of the supersonic plane with its notorious drooping nose and slender, delta wing configuration.

We knew that the craft only carried 100 passengers plus crew. But still it was somewhat unsettling to board such a small-size plane with a configuration of 2 passenger seats on each side of a narrow aisle with teeny, tiny, viewing windows and no overhead bins. The plane's interior was not unlike one of those little commuter flights between Los Angeles and Palm Springs. However, this was the aircraft that was going to be taking us out over the Atlantic to travel from New York to Paris in approximately 3 hours. More than half the normal flying time between the two cities.

Le Concorde departed precisely at 9:00am proceeding slowly towards the departure runway with its famous droopy nose pointed downward. Then there was a tremendous noise from the engines as the plane started to roll for takeoff; the nose lifted and settled into a normal position; and we were climbing at a rate of 5,000 ft per minute.

We had been pre-warned by the airline personnel about what to expect, but it still was unnerving and I grasped a hold of the seat arms as the plane rose. As I was sitting next to a window, I could easily view our rapid ascent.

The gentleman sitting next to me had been on numerous Concorde flights and was very reassuring about what was happening. If it were not for him, I'm not sure how I would have reacted. Experiencing heights has never been a great love of mine.

Before I knew it, however, the display panel at the front of the aircraft indicated we were flying at Mach 2.5 and had reached our cruising altitude. I was now 60,000 feet above the Earth.

The panoramic view of the Earth's curvature was beyond what I had ever imagined and totally unforgettable. Now I knew how the Astronauts must feel as they blast off into space. I was mesmerized by the scene for those next few hours. The good wine and the great food that were served during that time only enriched the experience.

At the moment two companies are hoping to capitalize on Earthlings desire to go into space: Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic endeavor operating out of Mojave, CA,; and the Hawthorne-based Space X company run by Elon Musk. Would I want to be put on a wait list to go on one of their rockets into space?

Possibly, if I'm fortunate enough to win money in the PVAC House raffle. After all, the launch will be close to home.

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Design concept for a future supersonic aircraft.