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AIR CRUISERS: DELUXE ACCOM- MODATIONS AT 30,000 FEET

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Unless you own a private jet, it's generally accepted that the only good thing about long-haul flights is the view. But all of that is about to change with deluxe onboard hospitality experiences.

Four Seasons have unveiled a branded Boeing 757 for 'air cruises'. Susan Helstab, of Four Seasons' marketing team, says: "The jet was developed to fulfil the wealthy's wish to explore the world in utmost comfort."

The aircraft, which will have 52 leather flatbeds and luxe bathrooms, will be staffed with chefs and a concierge to plan spa treatments and meal times. The service launches next February with a 24-day trip that begins in Los Angeles and includes stops in Bora Bora, India and Turkey on its way to London. Guests will stay at Four Season hotels at each stop. Another trip will take in performances at Milan's Teatro alla Scala, Prague's Estates Theatre and a private gala at the Pavlovsk Palace outside St. Petersburg. Private fully staffed charters are also available.

In December, Etihad Airlines will launch a new Airbus A380s, where first-class passengers can enjoy the

world's first three-roomed suite ('The Residence') on a commercial aircraft as well as nine single-bed 'First Apartments' modelled on a "luxury boutique hotel around a theme of Arabian modernism," explains Mike Crump from Honour Branding.

Honour is one of three UK-based design agencies that make up the Etihad Design Consortium (EDC). The EDC was put together six years ago to completely transform the Etihad passenger experience, but it is their First Class offering that has hoteliers excited. While the concept of passengers enjoying a separate bed and seat is not entirely new – Lufthansa already has such a product – Etihad has carried it off with a style and panache (think Poltrona Frau upholstery and custom carpets!) that has seen them leapfrog other major players in the luxury travel market.

"Etihad thinks like a hotel, not

an airline," explains Crump, "They refer to 'guests' not 'passengers', and their staff includes porters, chefs and food and beverage managers, so when it came to designing The Residence and the First Apartments we looked to hotels for inspiration."

Crump's team's innovative use of seriously limited space saw them transforming the 'dead' mezzanine level around the front stairwell of the A380 into a two-person suite with a separate bedroom, lounge and bathroom while their use of a single hotel-style corridor (wide-bodied aircrafts usually have two aisles) made the First Apartments possible.

Tickets will not be cheap (up to \$43,000 on some routes if the rumours are to be believed), but the fact that Emirates have already announced plans to launch a similar product would suggest some travellers are willing to pay anything for a good night's sleep.

