

ETIHAD AIRWAYS

BOEING 787-8 DREAMLINER

The last couple of years proved very eventful for commercial aviation, with a number of firsts coming online courtesy of the Gulf carriers. Etihad Airways (EY) unveiled its completely revamped image, and Qatar Airways (QR) became the launch customer of the Airbus A350-900XWB. A business trip to Dubai gave me the opportunity to sample the new Etihad product on its Dreamliners, flying from Düsseldorf (DUS) to Abu Dhabi (AUH), while its Qatari competitor flew me back via Doha (DOH) to Frankfurt (FRA) on its new A350. To make a balanced comparison, I selected two daylight flights with almost identical inflight products.

STORY Luigi Vallero PHOTOS Author

As I had already arrived to Düsseldorf the evening before my flight to AUH, my morning started early but at a leisurely pace. Etihad flights are handled in DUS Terminal C, dedicated to long-haul and extra-Schengen flights. The twice-daily route between the industrial northern German city and the UAE capital has been operated jointly by Etihad Airways and its European partner, Air Berlin, since February 1, 2015.

Düsseldorf has the distinction of being the first destination in Etihad's network served by the airline's latest state-of-the-art addition, the Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner.

My boarding pass, which I was given at 09:40 by a kind German woman attending the Business Class check-in desk, showed 11E, an aisle seat; I then proceeded through security and customs, which, that morning, seemed to take ages despite the relatively low number of passengers.

I was actually disappointed by the security agents' attitude; they seemed completely uninterested in the passengers' need to reach their gate. Finally, 20 minutes later, I reached gate C40. Boarding was underway on A6-BLA, the brand new Etihad Dreamliner—currently the only of its kind in the Emirati airline fleet—resplendent in its distinctive and colorful 'Facets of Abu Dhabi' livery under an unusual German winter sun.

No differentiated boarding seemed to be available at DUS and I was finally welcomed onboard by a gleaming crew, happy to be flying on Etihad's brand new 'toy', and shown my way to my seat. At this point during boarding, the cabin was already a hive of activity, as both Business Class and Economy passengers were settling in their places, but I managed to quickly reach my seat or, more appropriately, my 'Business Studio', as Etihad dubs its new Premium Class seating; I was immediately surprised by its generous size.

The airline claims there is 20% more space here than in the already excellent Etihad Pearl Business Class arrangement. On the Dreamliner, it was arranged as a small compartment, with seating for eight just behind the First Class cabin and a larger area accommodating another 20 passengers immediately to the right of the entry door.

In a departure from previous EY Pearl Business Class configurations, the Studios have alternating forward – and rear facing seats, à la British Airways, in a 1-2-1



QATAR AIRWAYS

AIRBUS A350-900XWB



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arrangement, each seat granting easy and direct aisle access.

The generous arrangement features a comfortable 22in wide chair upholstered in a pleasant brown canvas-style fabric. The upper part features a light brown *Poltrona Frau* leather upholstery, with the brand of the famous Italian luxury seat-maker embossed in it; Etihad's effort to really go the extra mile in looking after details clearly shows.

Around the seating, plenty of space is available, with a small table providing a useful area to comfortably hold the passengers' belongings, a recessed closet under a light brown leather skin covered a hatch which housed the noise-canceling headset, the amenity kit, and a bottle of water. A wide 15in LCD screen, a very sleek lamp in polished golden finish, in-seat power sockets, and audio/ethernet connectivity completed the equipment available in the 'studio'.

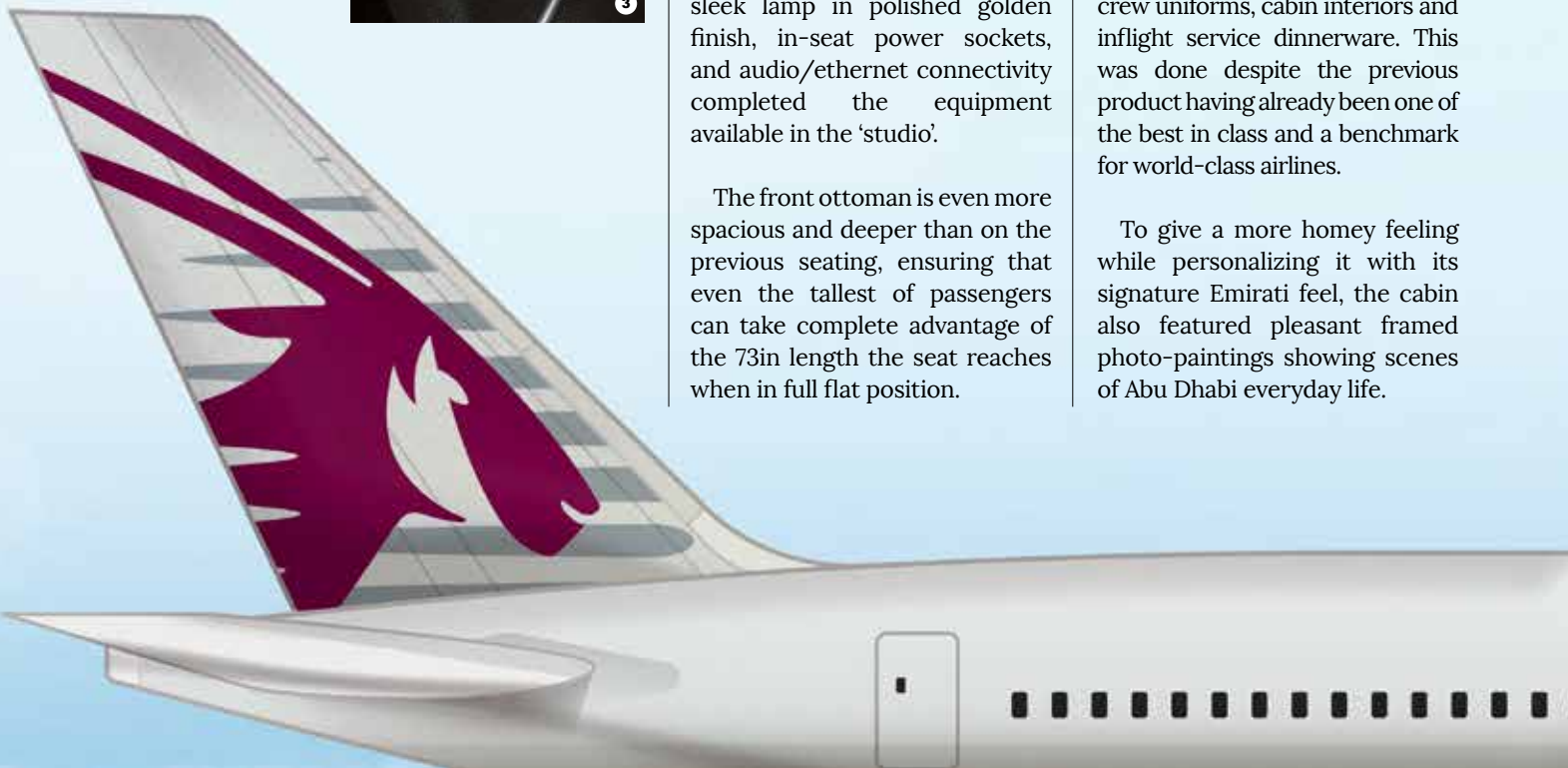
The front ottoman is even more spacious and deeper than on the previous seating, ensuring that even the tallest of passengers can take complete advantage of the 73in length the seat reaches when in full flat position.

The center seats, which are paired in order to provide a 'honeymoon style' arrangement, feature a solid partition that ensures maximum privacy for those passengers not traveling together. Individual seating is available along the center aisle and the windows; these seats also feature a movable partition for more privacy.

On my flight, every seat had a large pillow featuring the new *Facets of Abu Dhabi* triangular design theme in the colors of chocolate brown, gold, and cream. A warm blanket was placed on the ottoman along with the menu card of the day.

Despite being a very young airline, with this latest revamp, Etihad has redesigned virtually everything, from aircraft livery to crew uniforms, cabin interiors and inflight service dinnerware. This was done despite the previous product having already been one of the best in class and a benchmark for world-class airlines.

To give a more homey feeling while personalizing it with its signature Emirati feel, the cabin also featured pleasant framed photo-paintings showing scenes of Abu Dhabi everyday life.





The palette used for the comfortable seating went very well with the warm colors used around the cabin. The interior varied from cream-colored walls and partitions to a range of browns used in the carpets with highlights in anthracite black and polished gold.

Those accents perfectly complemented the new crew uniforms designed, once again, by Italian stylist Ettore Bilotta; they reflected a contemporary look in their chocolate brown, orange, and purple tones, while nodding back to the good old days. Female FAs wore purple berets that reminded me of the days when flying was a glamorous affair.

As soon as I had comfortably settled, the inflight Food & Beverage Manager (F&B), wearing his distinctive cream-white uniform, came to offer me a drink—I took a freshly squeezed orange juice, although Champagne was also available—and a warm o-shibori towel,

nowadays placed on a silver lined tray that has replaced the previous faux wood one.

Boarding was completed by 10:10, and I was soon able to switch to 10C, a rear-facing window seat overlooking the Dreamliner's elegantly designed swept wing and mighty GENx engine.



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While passengers settled in, the F&B came around again taking orders for both the aperitif service and lunch. Pushback started at 10:30, 10 minutes past ETD. The Captain gave an estimated flight time of six hours four minutes.

Seven minutes after pushback, we were finally on our own, moving towards the end of Runway 5R. With an almost full load, the takeoff roll took a while, although the GENx engines spooling off their maximum thrust provided an impressively effortless and sprightly takeoff run.

Airborne at 10:44, we continued eastward and, roughly 10 minutes later, service sprang into action—my beverage was served with a bowl of warm nuts.

From my point of view, the recent introduction of the far-too-common serving of nuts has slightly scaled down the food service on Etihad; their previous offering was a more exclusive and tempting amuse-bouche-style aperitif. Along with the drinks, the crew also came around offering a complimentary Wi-Fi access card.

I selected a movie from the extremely easy-to-use E-Box IFE, which offered a wide selection of films, ranging from golden classics to cinema premieres, TV, radio, and music channels.

The seating, lighting, and window controls were centralized in an extremely intuitive and user-friendly control panel located on the seat wall close to the IFE handset, which was of the latest generation and much more akin to an iPhone than to traditional equipment.



The innovative electrochromic dimming feature of the windows, replacing the traditional blinds on the 787, is one of the signature features of this aircraft continued to amaze me.

After the aperitif, it was time to start the meal, which, in my case, began with an Arabic warm and cold mezze starter; I felt that it was a bit lacking in flavor compared to previous ones I had sampled.

The food, as always on Etihad, was served on a pre-set, elegant tray placed over a linen cloth, complete with gourmet bread, butter, oil, balsamic dressing, and salt and pepper shakers.

As a drink, I chose a 2007 Bordeaux red wine, which paired perfectly with the tasty and substantial main course of lamb loin served with pumpkin, baby squash, and spring onions.

To complete my repast, I chose a selection of international

cheeses served with grapes and three different cracker types, along with a delicious Greek yogurt and honey mousse cake, which was highlighted by a glass of dessert wine.

Now, flying over the coasts of Romania, it was time for a relaxing cup of peppermint tea, which came with two kinds of sugar, mint leaves, and a chocolate brownie praline.

The full meal service was over roughly one hour and 40 minutes after takeoff, and was followed by another o-shibori towel.

Completely satiated and satisfied, I was then invited by the friendly Cabin Manager to visit the First Class cabin, which has also been the subject of a substantial revamp. The already ultra-comfortable Poltrona Frau seating has become even more spacious, and all upholstery and cushions have been re-designed and improved.

I chatted with the genuinely friendly crew, who, all through the flight, called me by name. They only had words of praise for the Dreamliner, saying that they felt much less fatigued upon arrival thanks to the revolutionary cabin environmental system, while also praising the numerous improvements introduced in the galley design, which now provides a much easier and safer environment for the crew.

We flew over the Turkish city of Trabzon, and then cruised over Iran before jutting out over the Arabian Sea with less than one hour and 10 minutes left to go before landing in Abu Dhabi.

I requested a quick snack of vanilla ice cream, which came served with an almond biscuit while I enjoyed a jazz music channel.

It was then, too soon, time to prepare the cabin for landing and, with the Arabian night already having fallen, we started our descent into AUH having flown over the northernmost tip of Qatar.

The crew began the standard long procedure for coming in to land from the southeast; yet, all the maneuvering was hardly discernible—a testament to the 787's excellent aerodynamic qualities.

We were finally on the ground at 19:45, having spent six hours in the air, and on the blocks at a remote stand 10 minutes later, five minutes behind ETA, in the balmy and warm Emirati evening.

We were a bit sorry to leave behind the new 'baby' and its comfortable interior.

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On my return trip, the detour via Doha necessary to try the A350-900XWB involved a very early morning departure at 05:30 from Dubai International Airport (DXB) on flight QR1003, operated by a Boeing 787-8.

Upon landing at DOH and with almost two hours of connecting time, I headed for a leisurely and excellent breakfast at the restaurant of the Al Mourjan Business Class Lounge. After a



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quick detour at the Duty Free, it was time to head to gate A3, dedicated to the A350 service to Frankfurt.

Having entered service on one of the two daily QR Frankfurt flights on January 15, 2015, the ads shown at the gate proclaimed, “Proud to be the first to fly the world’s newest aircraft.”

The brand-new aircraft, displaying its distinctive ‘bandit mask’ windshield and typically curved wingtips, was docked in final preparation for its routine operation to the German hub.

Boarding was finally called at around 07:05 in preparation for our ETA of 07:40. Business Class passengers—Qatar has no First Class on the A350XWB—were invited to board at any time they wished through a dedicated jet bridge. In Qatar’s configuration, the state-of-the-art twin-aisle wide-body seats 283 passengers—247 in Economy and 36 in Business Class.

As soon as I had entered the cabin through the bar area and the iconic ceiling rotunda, I was impressed by the feeling of spaciousness.

On the A350XWB, Qatar Airways has opted for a Business Class arrangement similar, although with more seats, to that of its 787s, featuring a forward cabin accommodating 24 passengers and a smaller aft 12 seat cabin separated by the convivial bar/lounge area.

Passengers are granted more headroom, larger overhead storage space, and wider panoramic windows than on other Airbus wide-body models.

As had been the case with my eastbound flight on Etihad’s 787, the all-female crew seemed very proud to be serving on a brand-new airliner. I was shown to my seat, 3A, and, as soon as I had settled, I was offered a refreshing drink of lemon-mint juice, along with a selection of newspapers. The ambiance was superb.

During boarding, mood lighting was set to a range of light blue, orange, and pink tones that—although a bit unnatural—complemented very well the typical Qatar overall white side walls and partitions and the individual 1-2-1 seating arrangement that is now standard on the airline’s 787s and A380s.

The individual window seats, ideal for single travelers, are slightly angled to provide a perfect outside view through a couple of windows, while the center seats, angled towards the center, are perfect for passengers traveling with their partners or just wanting to spend a shared moment.

The designers have drawn out stowage space from every single available recess, and the color palette perfectly reflects the corporate image of burgundy, gray, and highlights in opaque wood.

A large high resolution screen allowed a perfect view of the vast choice of entertainment available through the enhanced Oryx Entertainment System.

Seat controls were extremely easy to use and enabled a vast choice of movements; the seat could quickly convert from upright to fully flat, included



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a massage function, and had comfortable armrests that could be lowered or extended.

A large bed-style pillow, a warm blanket, and a small Giorgio Armani amenity kit for men had already been placed on my seat. The headset and a bottle water were available inside a small closet cleverly hidden in one of the armrests.

Looking over my head, I noticed that, on its latest product, Airbus has decided to maintain a relatively traditional approach to passenger service units (PSUs), with the air conditioning vents typical to the A330/340 family. The only visible innovation is an LED fasten-seat-belt and annunciator panel.

With boarding apparently completed, things suddenly got hectic as an elderly Arabian lady who needed medical assistance was brought onboard. It took 30 minutes for the ground and cabin crew to find the best way to place





her on her seat along with her medical support equipment and nurses. In the meantime, one of the FAs had come around taking orders for the à la carte meal service to be offered after takeoff.

Our ontime departure was therefore jeopardized by a non-routine event; yet, the Captain made an announcement indicating that, with an estimated flying time of around six hours, we would probably make up some time in the air—which, in fact, we did.

Finally pushing back at 08:08, the mighty Rolls-Royce Trent XWBs came up to their full power once we were aligned with the centerline of Runway 34R, soaring majestically over Doha Bay and leaving the Qatari capital skyline clearly visible to our left under the early morning sunlight.

Less than 20 minutes into the flight, service started with a light breakfast: fresh seasonal fruits along with Greek yogurt served with orange compote and granola, along with freshly baked breakfast pastries and a well-prepared cappuccino. As usual on QR, each service was provided as in First Class, with the place settings individually laid out by the stewardess. Nothing was served on trays.

One interesting feature of the A350 are the window blinds, which, like on the A380, are elegant electrically-operated Venetian ones, enabling passengers to regulate the intensity of light to let through. Although not as sophisticated as the electrochromic system used on the 787, which enabled passengers to retain a view of the outside world even at maximum



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dim setting, I found this a very effective and useful system, adding a classy touch to an already very sleek cabin interior.

Browsing through the impressive Oryx system, Qatar provided an excellent library of entertainment options, although I found it a bit annoying that the inflight camera was no longer among the options available to individual passengers. The purser told me that this feature

can now only be operated by one of the crew members for general viewing during takeoff and landings.

With the flight progressing across the Gulf, and then over Iran and Turkey, I took a leisurely stroll to the bar/lounge area, which, like on the Dreamliner, consists of stations featuring a large marble-style table used both as a magazine library and for the self-service refreshment table; this was set up by the FAs with fresh fruit, chocolates, a bottle of Rosé Champagne, and a bowl of red roses, one of the signature elements of QR.

Upon returning to my comfortable seat, with our flight already crossing over the boundary between the Bulgarian and Rumanian coastlines and with less than two hours remaining before our arrival in FRA, I called one of the FAs to serve lunch.

At this point, I discovered that my previously-placed order had been somehow ‘forgotten’. Apologies came; the crew took my order once again and offered me a glass of Champagne as an aperitif along with a packet of sea salt crackers.

Shortly afterwards, my starter of cured salmon with dill cream cheese was elegantly served with quail eggs, capers, and pickled red onion, followed by a delicious main of sautéed gnocchi in a sage and parmesan cheese sauce, offered with roasted butternut squash. A rocket salad added a pleasant zing to the flavorful combination.

To complete the meal, I went for a selection of cheeses, well-presented with crackers, grapes,



THE VERDICT

Both airlines and aircraft are among the finest currently flying anywhere in the world. Both the Dreamliner and A350 are really setting new comfort standards for passengers and crews thanks to their improved environmental system, as well as innovative cabin arrangements.

This is really like trying to compare best versus best: in general, I would say that I prefer Etihad's crew as being usually more pro-active toward passengers than Qatar's. The food and beverages, as well as the IFE, are probably slightly superior on Qatar. Cabin ambiance depends very much on personal taste; Qatar has a more classy approach, whereas Etihad likes to 'experiment' with new solutions.

and chutney, and, as a final indulgence, the now-trademark *Ladurée* selection of individual desserts, consisting, on today's flight, of a lemon tartlet and a chocolate éclair. These were all washed down with one of my preferred 'travel' wines, Tawny Port, which Qatar Airways' guests have the privilege of enjoying on the airline's flights.

In less than 50 minutes, I had finished my meal, and another very welcome o-shibori towel was offered.

Soon afterwards, we started the long procedure for landing, which involved flying to the west of FRA, thus adding a few minutes to the expected travel time, before approaching the German airport's Runway 07R.

We finally landed at 12:23 and docked at our gate in Terminal 1 at 12:31, just one minute past ETA.

As on the outbound flight, it was all too soon to leave this great aircraft and airline.



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RANKING		
	EY	QR
CHECK-IN	8.00	8.00
BOARDING	8.00	8.00
SEAT	9.00	9.00
AMBIANCE	9.00	8.00
IFE	8.00	9.00
CREW	9.00	7.00
FOOD	7.00	8.00
BEVERAGE	8.00	9.00
ON-TIME	10.00	9.00
OVERALL	9.50	9.40

*Airways Rankings are based on a scale of 0-10.