



Etihad currently operate a fleet of eight Airbus A380s, including A6-APC (c/n 176) seen departing from London/Heathrow. It has a further two examples on order.
ALL PHOTOS AUTHOR

BELOW LEFT • Another of Etihad's butlers, Leanne, guides the author to the waiting aircraft.

BELOW • The carrier also provides a chauffeur service, supplying one car for passengers and another for baggage.

BOTTOM • The Residence Lounge is keeping with the carrier's contemporary design, combining dark wood walls with cream and beige leather chairs and sofas.

The Residence

Sam Chui delivers his verdict on Etihad Airways' luxurious, beyond-First Class experience.

It has been almost two years since Etihad Airways introduced its customers to The Residence. According to the Abu Dhabi-based flag carrier, the multi-faceted offering provides "a truly unique and bespoke travel experience, delivered with complete discretion and limitless hospitality." At the heart of this phenomenal product is a three-room suite, housed at the front of the upper deck of its Airbus A380s and featuring a luxurious living room, separate double bedroom and en-suite shower room, as well as the services of a Savoy Hotel-trained butler. It is intended to accommodate up to two passengers and, unsurprisingly, such luxury comes at a price. When it was first introduced, one-way tickets between London and Abu Dhabi started at \$20,000, far beyond the budget of most of the travelling public. Speaking at the launch in 2014, CEO James Hogan said the fare represented "a good deal" when compared with the \$100,000 to \$160,000 it would cost to hire an executive jet for a similar journey.

I have spoken to very few people who have used the product, and there are even fewer published reviews that

showcase exactly what you receive for the extraordinary airfare. Fortunately for me, Etihad has recently reviewed this pricing strategy and has reduced ticket prices, making The Residence a little more affordable. This was all the invitation I needed, and I quickly jumped at the chance to sample what

The Residence passengers are escorted to a dedicated lounge in Abu Dhabi International Airport where a butler is assigned to them.

Within two hours of making the booking, I was called by Etihad's VIP concierge with a personal greeting.



the airline says is the "most luxurious living space in the air", albeit on the cheapest fare currently available – a \$3,036 one-way trip from Abu Dhabi to Mumbai.

A Bespoke Offering

Within two hours of making the booking, I was called by Etihad's VIP concierge with a personal greeting. They also started the process of customising my trip – this included discussing dietary requirements, arrival plan (such as transport, restaurant booking or event tickets) and even whether I preferred a male or female butler.

The concierge provision continued right up to the point of departure with periodic updates and, on the day I was travelling, a call to advise of a short delay on the outbound flight. >>



Rather helpfully, Etihad includes a chauffeur service for The Residence customers, intended to provide a seamless luxury experience from start to finish. However, one can imagine my surprise when two cars turned up to collect me – a pristine, white Audi A8 limousine, followed by a Toyota Previa MPV solely to carry my luggage. I felt rather guilty that my trip was short and I didn't actually have any bags...

On arriving at Abu Dhabi International Airport, I was warmly welcomed by two Etihad hosts, who were waiting at the kerbside for the car to pull up. Unusually, no check-in was required – as my boarding pass had been issued in advance I was whisked through immigration and security screening and then directly to The Residence Lounge, a dedicated area within the carrier's First Class lounge. With the aim of keeping its premium offering exclusive, Etihad restricts admission to this superb facility, and The Residence product in its entirety, only to those willing to splash the cash on a ticket; free passes and customer upgrades simply do not exist.

The impressive Residence Lounge, which features a separate dining area, is the epitome of luxury.

TOP RIGHT • Etihad's Executive Sous Chef Steve Tuchscherer personally delivered each course on Vera Wang dining ware designed especially for The Residence.

ABOVE RIGHT • The author dined on canapés of Abu Dhabi-farmed caviar, followed by chicken liver pâté, grilled duck breast and then mille-feuille for dessert.

RIGHT • The 'living room' area of The Residence is tastefully decorated with plush carpets and brown leather furniture. The sofa-style seating is designed for two passengers but could easily accommodate four.



When I reached the lounge, my personal butler Mr Salah was waiting at the door to greet me.

Cognac and Cigars

When I reached the lounge, my personal butler Mr Salah was waiting at the door to greet me. The term 'breath-taking' is used all too frequently, but entering The Residence facility is one of those rare occasions when it is really apt. It is the epitome of luxury, keeping with the carrier's contemporary design by combining dark wood walls with cream and beige leather chairs and sofas. In addition to a generous lounge space, it also offers a separate private dining area along with its own bar.

My butler, Salah, is French-Algerian and is fluent in more than six languages. He, along with his colleagues, are part of an elite, hand-picked band of the nation's best service industry professionals, each of whom underwent a specially tailored course at the



LEFT • The in-flight menu, offering a choice of four appetisers and six main courses.

Passengers are welcomed on board with a personalised letter signed by the captain, while their name is also printed inside the menu.

University of West London and The Savoy Hotel before completing their training in Abu Dhabi.

He delivered a guided tour of the lounge, which also features a private bathroom with shower and a separate prayer room, and afterwards, without any prompting, fetched a bottle of Bollinger La Grande Année 2005 Cham-



After the delicious lunch, Salah suggested I might like to try one of the fine cigars that are available free of charge...

pagne and opened it ready to pour.

I took some time to bask in the beautiful surroundings of the lounge before relocating to the dining area for lunch. Etihad's Executive Sous Chef, Steve Tuchscherer, personally delivered each course on Vera Wang dining ware designed especially for The Residence – it really was a privilege to dine in such a luxurious manner.

Lunch was, unsurprisingly, a multi-dish affair, kicking off with canapés of Abu Dhabi-farmed Caviar.

This was followed by chicken liver pâté, grilled duck breast and mille-feuille for dessert. The menu was all the more remarkable given the ongoing difficulties of sourcing fresh produce

and ingredients in the Middle East.

The presentation was immaculate and, while I still think Air France's Salon La Premiere offers better food, Etihad is a very close second and should be recognised for how much work it is putting into its premium product.

After the delicious lunch, Salah suggested I might like to try one of the fine cigars that are available free of charge in a dedicated area of the First Class lounge. The butler astounded me with his incredible knowledge of the selection on offer, patiently explaining about each cigar before I settled on a Cuban Hoyo de Monterrey.

The Residence lounge is a remarkable addition to Etihad's impressive First Class facility, which features a spa, styling salon, gym, relaxation area and a full bar. In terms of comfort, it is almost a home from home. But, with a butler available for the entire duration of your stay, and a complimentary cigar and glass of Cognac, it is unrivalled when it comes to attention, care, luxury and privacy. >>



An Airborne Sanctuary

With the departure time rapidly looming, I bade farewell to Salah before boarding a golf buggy, in the company of a dedicated driver and a bell boy, for the short trip to Gate 61. Notably, the carrier presents you with three sets of boarding cards – one for official use and another two as souvenirs, a thoughtful touch.

I was met at the gate by the impeccably dressed Leanne, another of Etihad's Savoy-trained butlers, who escorted me along the premium passenger-only upper deck airbridge to the waiting A380, A6-APD (c/n 180). This was the moment I had been waiting for, boarding the aircraft and then turning left through First Class and into The Residence.

In my private and tranquil oasis, it was nearly impossible to tell I was in an aircraft carrying almost 500 passengers...

The Residence

Aircraft type	Airbus A380
Aircraft registration	A6-APD
Aircraft configuration	9 First Class 'Apartments' 70 Business 'Studios' 419 Economy Seats
Route	Abu Dhabi – Mumbai
Flight duration	2hrs 39mins
Ticket price	\$3,036 one way \$4,200 return

The 2hr 40min flight from Abu Dhabi to Mumbai is one of the shortest sectors flown by Etihad's A380 fleet.

I entered the 'living room', which is tastefully decorated with plush carpets and brown leather furniture. My seat is more akin to a sofa and, though designed for two passengers, could easily accommodate four.

As I made myself comfortable, Leanne offered a pre-departure drink. She closed the door as she left to fetch my Arabic coffee and dates, and I was immediately struck by just how much space the cabin offers. In my private and tranquil oasis, it was nearly impossible to tell I was in an aircraft carrying almost 500 passengers, and it's easy to see why The Residence commands such a high fare.

Etihad really has paid very close attention to even the smallest details; there was a welcome letter addressed

to me by name and signed by the captain, and my name even featured on the menu cover, a truly personalised experience.

No Time to Spare

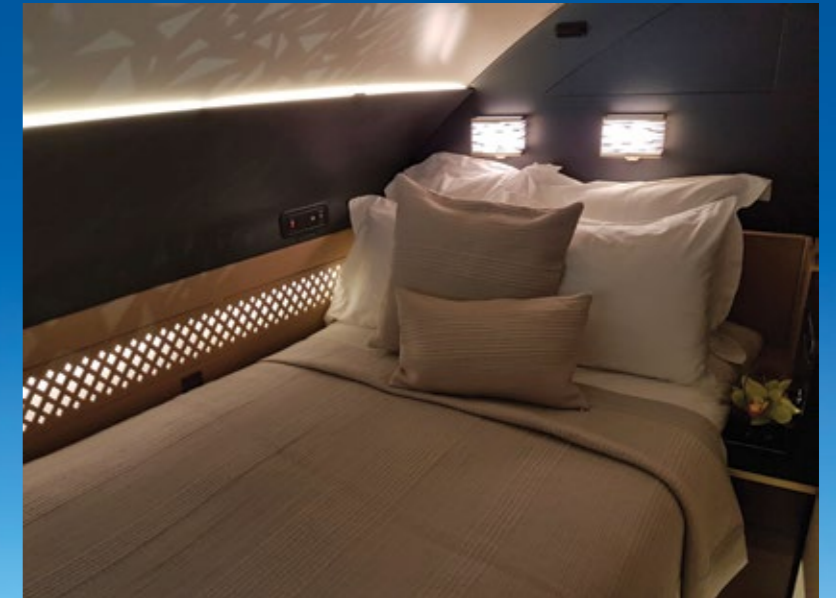
The flight to Mumbai is one of the shortest sectors operated by Etihad's A380s – just 2hrs 39mins, tracking east from Abu Dhabi over Oman and across the Arabian Sea to India. This leaves very little time for the crew to carry out a full service, particularly on this occasion with 495 of the jet's 496 seats being occupied. This also extended to the on-board chef, who had to produce multi-course gourmet meals for me and nine other First Class passengers in just two hours.

No sooner had the seatbelt signs >>

The on-board butler Leanne, seen here pouring traditional Arabic coffee, was on hand throughout the flight.

TOP RIGHT • *The Residence features a separate bedroom complete with a 6ft 10in (2.08m) double bed dressed with Italian designer linen.*

The author opted to dine in bed, and watched the sunset via the inbuilt widescreen TV.



been turned off than the crew sprang into action, though there was very little evidence of this from my sanctuary at the front of the aircraft. I'd had an excellent lunch on the ground not long before so I elected to delay my meal and instead try out the bedroom. This is set away from the living area, separated by a hallway leading to a 6ft 10in (2.08m) double bed dressed with Italian designer linen and complete with a proper, firm mattress and plush pillows. Leanne talked through its various features – the door closes fully ensuring complete privacy, though there is a service call bell and a panic button in the event a passenger requires assistance. Of course, it is only proper that one wears pyjamas for bed and Etihad offers its passengers Christian Lacroix sleepwear, by far the most comfortable I've sampled aboard any airliner.

A quick visit to the private bathroom revealed high-end toiletries from Acqua di Parma from Italy, while even the toilet paper featured The Residence logo.

Dinner in Bed

Sadly the flight wasn't long enough to permit sleep and then a full meal, so I decided to combine both and dine in bed! My butler set up a wooden tray (the first time she had used it in service) and then returned with my starter – another round of Abu Dhabi-farmed caviar, eaten from the comfort of my own bed and while watching the sunset on a widescreen TV.

I opted to eat the main course back in the lounge, so Leanne set the table, once again with Vera Wang-designed



tableware. I was eager to benefit from the full The Residence experience, despite the relatively short duration of the flight. The extensive menu included a choice of four different appetisers (truffle chicken with

The author (third from left) poses with the cabin crew after arriving in Mumbai.

artichoke and rocket leaf jelly; hot and cold Gulf mezze; and Pudina Mutter Shorba (a mint-flavoured, yogurt-based soup) as well as the caviar) and six mains, of which I chose the lobster tail with purple potatoes, asparagus, and pink peppercorn and citrus butter. The exquisite service was completed with a cup of Sencha green tea.

My butler set up a wooden tray and then returned with my starter – another round of Abu Dhabi-farmed caviar, eaten from the comfort of my own bed

Access to The Residence does not come cheap – one-way air fares started at \$20,000 when the service was launched in 2014, though this has been reduced significantly of late.

Money Well Spent?

After landing in Mumbai my butler Leanne bid me farewell along with the purser, chef, and the food and beverage manager, and I couldn't resist the urge to snap some photographs of the excellent team before making

made my way off the A380. I was then passed into the hands of the waiting ground team who escorted me to my connecting flight.

After leaving the aircraft I took some time to contemplate what had been an extraordinary experience. Before my adventure I had been filled with the same nervous excitement that accompanies almost every trip, but also a little trepidation – would the flight be worth the large amount of money I had paid?

In short, yes. I had utilised The Residence in full despite the relatively brief flight time, sampling the wonderful lounge, fine dining and warm hospitality. Put simply, there's nothing quite like it – in my opinion it is the best product sold by a commercial airline today and Etihad delivered a faultless travel experience, fine tuning every aspect to my personal taste. It is the closest thing fare-paying passengers will get to hiring their own private jet. **EW**

The author was suitably impressed by every aspect of The Residence, which Etihad claims offers a truly personalised experience at a fraction of the cost of a private jet.

