Boeing 747 Celebrates 30 Years In Service

The Queen of the Skies revolutionizes travel - then, now and in the future

It was late at night, Jan. 21, 1970 - a day the world had anticipated for years. With 336 passengers aboard, the giant Pan American World Airways 747 hurtled down the runway at New York's John F. Kennedy airport, took off gracefully, climbed smoothly, then turned east toward London and into the history books.

Thus began the jumbo-jet age.

Today, the 747 celebrates 30 years of service as the most recognized and prestigious airplane in the world. The "Queen of the Skies" invented long-range comfort, set new standards of technology and became one of America's leading exports.

Thirty years after its first commercial flight, the 747 remains a success story by any measure.

Consider the numbers: 1,238 have been delivered, more than any other widebody jet in history. Eleven-hundred are still in service, 500 of which are the high-technology 747-400.

Consider the accolades: New York's Museum of Modern Art recently added the 747 to a wish list of items it dreams about adding to its design collection. "The 747 is beautiful," says the museum's curator, "because of how it looks, how it works and what it represents."

And in November 1999, the 747 received its own U.S. postage stamp, recognizing its place as one of the top three aviation achievements of the 20th century - along with the Wright brothers' first flight and Lindbergh's crossing of the Atlantic.

"I think that's pretty good company," said Phil Condit, Boeing chairman and chief executive officer.

The 747 clearly is an airplane with an impressive pedigree. With every flight, it makes history.

"Boeing airplanes change the world, bringing people, ideas and opportunity together, increasing global understanding and prosperity," said Alan Mulally, Boeing Commercial Airplanes Group president. "The 747 is at the heart of this legacy."

Today's 747-400 may look like the Pan Am 747-100 that made its historic flight on Jan. 21, 1970. But the similarities end there.

"The 747-400 is an entirely new airplane, with improved aerodynamics, digital avionics, a high-tech flight deck, the latest in-flight entertainment systems and 3,000 miles (4,828 km) more range," said Ray Conner, 747 vice president and general manager. "It has greater passenger capacity, takeoff weight, engine thrust and dispatch reliability. A product that has accumulated 33 billion miles (52 billion km) of airborne experience, in an industry that has changed profoundly, is bound to evolve."

What's ahead for this remarkable airplane?

"There is a bright future for the 747 and it will remain the primary solution to the airlines' requirements for 400-seat and larger aircraft for many years to come," said John Roundhill, vice president of Product Strategy and Development. "We will continue to improve its range, payload and other capabilities in response to our customers' requirements."

"Currently, we are working to understand and validate airplane requirements, configuration and design by listening to our airline customers for potential 747-400 deliveries," Roundhill said. "We are studying for a versatile family of airplanes similar to that offered today with the 747-400 - including passenger airplanes and freighters."

While no timetable has been set, the airplanes are beginning to take shape - in computer models. The potential 747X family has a modified wing that carries more fuel, adds more lift and dramatically improves efficiency. To do this, the wingspan would be increased more than 17 feet (5.2 m) to about 229 feet (69.8 m). With an additional 100,000 pounds (45,400 kg) of fuel and improved aerodynamics, the 747X would be able to fly more than 10,000 statute miles (16,000 km), while carrying about 430 passengers.

Using the same modified wing, the 747X Stretch would be more than 263 feet (80.2 m) long and fly more than 9,000 statute miles (14,485 km) - with room for about 500 passengers in three-class seating. A freighter version of the 747X would provide operating efficiencies significantly improved over today's popular 747-400F.

The maximum takeoff weight for this airplane family is more than one million pounds. The airplanes will have even lower operating seat-mile costs than the 747-400 - already the lowest in the industry.

"There are tremendous opportunities ahead for the 747 - and the winners will be our employees, our customers, our shareholders and the traveling public," Conner said. "The 747's future is unlimited."

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747 Technical Characteristics: Now v. Then
Boeing 747-400, By The Numbers

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