The Airplane That Never Sleeps

From snowy tundra to sandy beach - the 'QC' fits the bill for two airlines in the U.S.

Almost everything spends some part of the day at rest - animals sleep, machines power down, flowers close. But not the 737QC. This unique airplane can fly passengers by day and cargo by night, needing only an occasional catnap.

This is great news for airlines, because they can't make money from airplanes sitting idle on the ground. But many air travel markets are not large enough to justify passenger flights both day and night, which means the airplanes must be parked overnight or used some other way.

Boeing came up with a solution. With the one-of-a-kind 737 "Quick Change" (QC) airplane, an airline has the flexibility to operate however many passenger flights it needs during the day, and in less than one hour convert the airplane into a cargo airplane for use throughout the night.

As shown here, the cargo containers for the 737QC are specially sized to fit the curvature of the fuselage to prevent damage to the interior. They easily roll into place, and experienced airline crews like this one at Alaska Airlines routinely perform the changeover from passenger configuration to freighter in less than an hour.
Aloha Airlines, serving hot Hawaii, and Alaska Airlines, serving cold Alaska, are two U.S. carriers operating in conditions where the QC fits in perfectly. Both carriers serve many island communities and other remote locations where there are no roads.

"A lot of our markets in Alaska depend completely on air travel," said Keola Pang-Ching, director of cargo, Alaska Airlines. "The 737 is a workhorse - the perfect airplane for these cities. They enable us to fly consistent, reliable service."

"This airplane makes a lot of sense for Aloha," said Ken Best, vice president, Cargo & Contract Services, Aloha Airlines. "The 737QC allows great aircraft utilization. It keeps generating revenue, while holding down operating costs."

Frequent, reliable service is a necessity to the citizens of the communities served by Alaska and Aloha Airlines not only because it's their only way in and out but also because much of the cargo is time-sensitive.

"Imagine if you ran a company in remote Prudhoe Bay, Alaska with a machine broken down that is costing you $25,000 a day. The only way to get replacement parts quickly would be by air, and the regular service provided by Alaska Airlines on the 737QC would be your savior," explained Jim Edgar, cargo marketing director with Boeing Commercial Airplanes.

Two Honolulu-based bakeries - Love's and Hawaii Baking Company - take advantage of Aloha's 737QC services to move their product out fresh each day to supermarkets, retailers, hotels and resorts throughout the islands. Love's had been working through various air cargo companies since the 1950s, but Aloha's QC service gave them a big boost in both reliability and service.

Honolulu newspapers and the U.S. Postal Service are also Aloha customers, as well as the papaya industry, which had been sending its cargo to Honolulu, the U.S. mainland and Japan on boats in refrigerated containers. The 737QCs gave the fruit companies faster service and consumers a fresher product.

In some cases, the 737s must land on short runways or in challenging weather conditions, and in some locations, like Alaska's Red Dog mine, they have to land on gravel. The 737 serve these needs well.

The 737QCs performed admirably when Hurricane Iniki hit Kauai in September 1992. The storm, with sustained winds of 145 miles per hour and gusts up to 175 miles per hour, did extensive damage to the island. While passenger traffic was down in the aftermath due to the loss of tourists, there was a huge increase in the amount of cargo traffic. The QCs were used in all-freighter configuration to move recovery supplies.

"This was a unique situation - we were a lifeline, moving supplies ranging from generators to building materials - anything that could be used in construction," Best said.

In Alaska's remote communities, the passengers and cargo customers are the same people. The airline carries household goods, groceries - everything needed to support the communities.

"They fly and ship with us every day," Pang-Ching said. "Without this airplane, these communities would not be able to get the four round-trips a day jet service they have now."

To make the "Quick Change" concept work, the inventive Boeing engineers designed pallets that hold entire rows of seats that could easily and quickly glide on and off the airplane. Twelve seats can be rolled into place at once. The sidewalls of each airplane, along with the rest of the interior, are thoroughly cleaned before being allowed back into passenger operation after a night as a cargo airplane. Once everything is in place, passengers can't tell the difference between a QC interior and any other interior.

When ready to be used as a freighter, the seats are simply rolled off and replaced by cargo containers or pallets, specially sized to fit the curvature of the fuselage to prevent damage to the interior. The process is carefully choreographed, and experienced airline crews routinely perform the changeover in less than an hour.

Aloha Airlines operates a fleet of five original 737-200QCs, the first of which entered service with the airline in October 1985. Their cargo operations are rounded out with an additional 737-200 freighter. Alaska Airlines operates eight 737-200 Combi/QCs. A "combi" is an airplane that can be configured in various passenger/cargo combinations at the same time, as well as all cargo or all passenger. Alaska flies these airplanes with 26, 32 or 72 seats, or all cargo.

So next time you're flying in a Boeing 737, close your eyes and let your imagination run wild. Is that the faint scent of delicious fresh-baked cinnamon buns you smell? Anything's possible with the 737.

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