



# THE GOLDEN AGE OF AIR TRAVEL

NINA HADAWAY

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View of the cockpit, captain and first officer on board a Vickers Viscount, the world's first gas-turbine-powered commercial aircraft.



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Concorde in flight.

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**IMPERIAL AIRWAYS**  
AND ASSOCIATED COMPANIES  
EUROPE · AFRICA · INDIA · CHINA · AUSTRALIA



# INTRODUCTION

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When once you have tasted flight you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward... (Leonardo da Vinci)

**S**INCE THE DAWN OF TIME, man has turned his eyes to the sky – and wondered. Flying has featured in fables, legends and myths. It has become a reality through trial and error, perseverance and scientific investigation, with the invention of both lighter-than-air vehicles such as balloons and heavier-than-air craft. Over the years the form of these creations has changed, with different disciplines and new technologies coming together to determine the latest designs. The role of the aircraft has also developed. This book looks at how commercial air travel has evolved from short joyrides to round-the-world flights. It highlights the passenger experience from the 1910s to the 1970s; the golden age of air travel because of the way in which flying was undertaken, the attitude of the public towards flight during this period, and the many features that no longer form a part of today's mass movement of people around the world. It was a time when flying was considered exciting and modern, both a novelty and a treat. It was a glamorous adventure to be savoured and enjoyed.



An early woodcut depicting the story of Icarus flying too close to the sun.



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The monoplane *Atalanta*, built for the British Empire routes of Imperial Airways, flies over Croydon Airport in the 1930s. Contemporary artwork.



# EARLY DAYS OF AIR TRAVEL

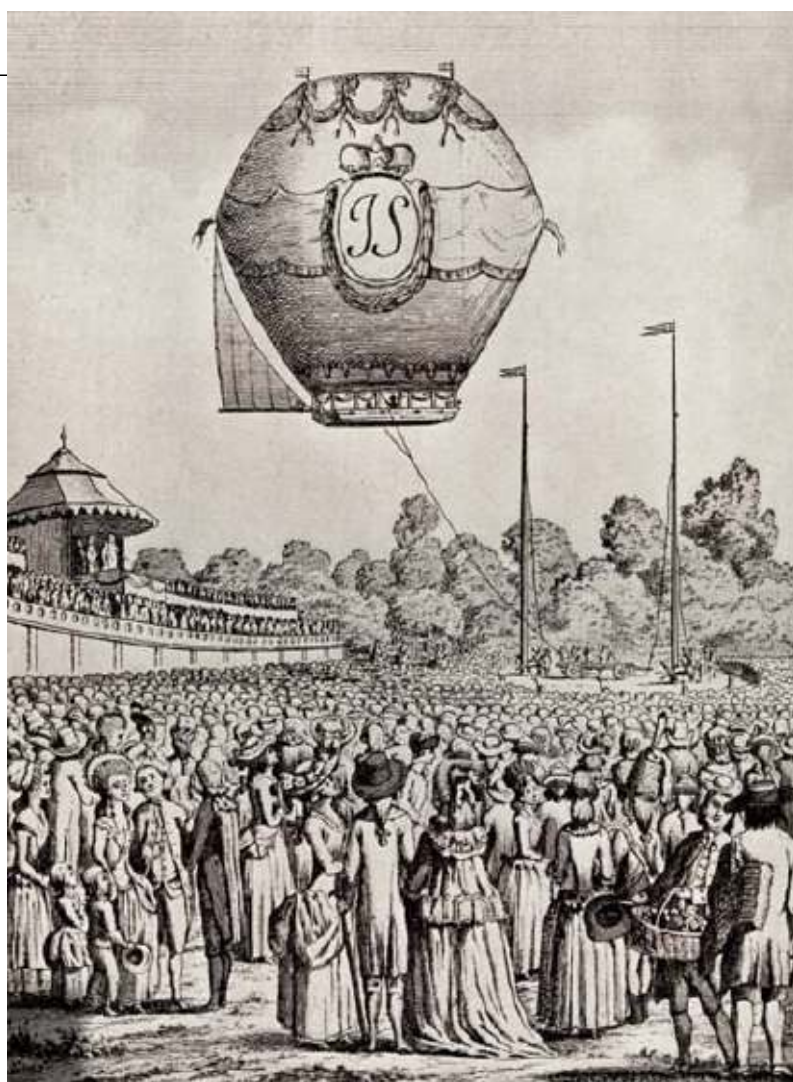
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**F**LYING WAS STILL IN ITS INFANCY when the first fare-paying passengers took to the air. As early as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, huge crowds gathered to witness the ascents made by pioneering balloonists. Soon it became possible for members of the public to be taken up, and at the cost of a few shillings several minutes could be spent aloft.

With the development of the aeroplane, enthusiasts promoted this exciting new mode of transport. Air shows and aerial derbies were organised during the 1910s. These caught the imagination of the public, and thousands attended meetings and displays. Those held at Hendon were very popular, and the 'Hendon Habit' was formed. Attending this venue became part of the summer social calendar alongside Ascot or Henley. The pilots taking part at Hendon became celebrities and offered joy-rides that were enthusiastically taken up by those who could afford them. It became fashionable to wrap up against the elements and to go on a circuit of the showground with one of these airmen. The thrill of such an experience was often accompanied by a degree of trepidation. Lieutenant Colonel Charles Edward Stewart was a passenger at Hendon in 1912. He recalled some years later:

There's nothing like your first flight! ... I climbed ... into the thing and saw my seat ... was a plank with ... wickerwork sides and back. The pilot's body would come between my legs and his shoulders would be level with my knees so that if the thing's nose dipped suddenly I should probably fall on top of him... I told him I felt most insecure.

The idea of taking several passengers up at once was explored, and companies such as the Graham White Aviation Company Ltd built aircraft for this purpose. Between 1910 and 1914 airships in Germany carried over thirty thousand passengers on sightseeing trips or on flights between the country's cities. By 1914 seasonal flights in aircraft were being undertaken in the United States and Russia. With the outbreak of the First World War, however, commercial flying in Europe effectively ceased until the conflict had ended in 1918. Despite these circumstances, the first commercial airline flying aircraft, Deutsche Luft Reederei (a forerunner of Lufthansa), was founded in 1917, although its services did not begin for another year.



The first balloon ascent from Vienna, 1784.



Souvenir programme for the Hendon air show, 1910s.

In the United Kingdom civil flying was banned until May 1919. The potential for commercial aviation was recognised by many, though, and a Department of Civil Aviation was set up. In the

immediate post-war years a number of air-travel companies were established in Europe, the United States and Australia. Their initial focus was on the transport of freight, especially mail, but some passenger services were also offered. Flights were slow compared to the speeds of today, but the aeroplane was faster than travelling by rail or sea, and this appealed to many businessmen. In some countries, such as Australia, air travel offered the best means of getting from one place to another.



Passengers and their pilot, Claude Grahame-White, on board the Grahame-White Type 10 Charabanc, Hendon, 1914.

Aircraft Transport and Travel (AT&T), a subsidiary of the British manufacturing firm Airco, flew the first scheduled international passenger flight in the summer of 1919. This took place between London (Hounslow Heath) and Paris (Le Bourget). AT&T was soon joined by other businesses, and services between Europe's leading capitals became available to those who could afford them. As armed forces shrank after the war, many of the companies purchased surplus military aircraft and employed skilled pilots who had served in the war. These pilots had sole responsibility for their passengers and the aircraft. In addition to an annual salary, they received flying pay, calculated from a set amount for each hour in the air.



Passengers waiting to board the Handley Page O/400 converted aircraft at Cricklewood aerodrome, northwest London, for their flight to Paris, c. 1919. Note the flying clothing worn by the pilot and several passengers.

Conditions in these converted military aeroplanes were basic. Customers often had to climb or be helped into seats that were exposed to the elements. Some amenities were available, however, and Handley Page Transport offered the first post-war in-flight refreshments. These consisted of lunch baskets available for an extra 3s. For customers of AT&T the loan of flying clothing was included in their fare. In aircraft with enclosed cabins passengers sat on wicker chairs bolted to the floor. They were widely spaced out so that there was plenty of leg-room, but no seat-belts were available. A toilet was often provided, but it was rather primitive, and located behind a curtain.



To ensure the aircraft was not overloaded, passengers, as well as their luggage, were weighed in the 1920s.

These early flights could take longer than their advertised time as they were dependent on the weather and the well-being of the 'stick and string' aircraft. Unscheduled stops for refuelling or repairs often had to be made along the way. Operating companies were known to issue money to the pilots in case the aircraft could not be fixed. If this happened, passengers would then be given the money so that they could reach their destination by alternative means.

Such discomforts or inconveniences seem to have been happily endured by those being flown. The discomforts were offset by the sheer novelty and allure of travelling in an aircraft. Although expensive, flying was quick, modern and adventurous. It rapidly became a fashionable thing to do and a symbol of good status. The premier route took place between London and Paris.

During the 1920s numerous air-travel companies were formed in the rush to exploit this new technology and to earn a profit. The customer base at this time, however, remained comparatively small and, with the industry still finding its feet, many companies ran into difficulties and had to cease operating. Several European governments, including those of France and Germany, supported their air-travel businesses – but not the United Kingdom. As a result, British companies experienced a crisis in 1921, but government subsidies were forthcoming and enabled services to be resumed, with companies agreeing to apportion certain routes among themselves.

From the mid-1920s developments took place that enhanced the passenger experience. Companies were conscious of the level of comfort enjoyed by their wealthy clientele when travelling by train or ocean liner and so gave priority to the service provided to them. Customers could expect motor cars to take them to the airfield or to meet them on arrival. Pilots attended to all customs arrangements and, if all ran smoothly, passengers could expect to be in the air ten minutes after arriving at the airfield. This was probably just as well as facilities on the ground were minimal. If the weather delayed their flight, customers would have to wait in a cold wooden hut. By the end of the 1920s, however, buildings comparable to railway terminals were being built at European airports. Schiphol (Amsterdam), for

example, had a hotel, café and restaurant available to its passengers. Croydon, which took over from Hounslow Heath as the London terminal airport in March 1920, was redeveloped and had stylish, modern buildings by 1928.

DAIMLER AIRWAY

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AIRWAY TICKET No. M427

| BY AIR | MANCHESTER | SINGLE |  
TO  
LONDON

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Name of Passenger *Mr Thompson*

Date of Passage *Dec 30/22*

Service *9-30* Seat No. \_\_\_\_\_

Fare Paid. ... £ *2* : *5* s. *0* d.

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By Appointment  
243, KNIGHTSBRIDGE, LONDON.

Daimler Airway ticket issued to Mr Thompson, 1922. The flight was undertaken by eight passengers on a De Havilland DH34.

New aircraft were built specifically for passenger travel and with comfort in mind. Among the first aircraft designed for civilians were the Handley Page W8A and the De Havilland DH18. Customers enjoyed well-ventilated cabins crafted from mahogany, fitted with upholstered armchairs, and featuring sliding glass windows that could be opened to improve the view. Despite restrictions placed on German production after the First World War, that country produced some outstanding civil aircraft in the 1920s. The Fokker VII was used by the Dutch airline Koninklijke Luchtvaart Maatschappij NV (KLM) and was equipped with radio telephony that enabled the crew to communicate with their colleagues on the ground. It also had a heated cabin furnished with chairs with sponge-rubber seating. Deutsche Lufthansa was formed in 1926 and used Junkers F.13 aircraft that had chairs fitted with seat-belts. The cockpit, for the first time, had dual controls, so that the physical effort of handling the aircraft could now be shared between a captain and his first officer. During this period pilots were also making the adjustment to flying within an enclosed cabin. Hitherto they were used to flying in open cockpits and felt that this provided them with better visibility. Nonetheless, the

change was gradually accepted and was no doubt appreciated as the speed capability of aircraft increased.

With British companies continuing to struggle, the Hambling Committee recommended the formation of a new commercial organisation run along business lines, but which would receive government support. The national airline Imperial Airways Limited was created by merging Handley Page Transport, Instone Air Line Ltd, Daimler Airway and British Marine Air Navigation Company (BMAN). Operations were due to begin across Europe on 1 April 1924 but were delayed because of a strike by its pilots, who were concerned about pay and conditions. They agreed to a salary of £800 a year and flights began on 24 April 1924.



The lavish interior of the Handley Page W8 featuring upholstered chairs and curtains at the windows.

Imperial Airways worked hard to perpetuate the glamorous image of flying by advertising its clientele of royalty, film stars and famous personalities. Services were pitched at those who were in a position to enjoy them. There were no distinct 'classes' on board aircraft at this time, but a range of fares was offered on the company's flights to Europe's capitals, so that passengers could pay for what they required. A convenient flying time was available in a new, comfortable, modern aircraft such as the Armstrong Whitworth Argosy, or a slower, cheaper flight could be taken at a less convenient time and in an older, more basic aircraft such as the Handley Page HP66. The first truly luxurious air service was introduced by Imperial Airways in 1927. Their 'Silver Wing' service to Paris was expensive and exclusive. On these flights the airline steward made his first ever appearance. Dressed in a smart white jacket, bow tie and cap, he served a first-class meal and drinks to the passengers. The pre-cooked food was heated up and presented on the finest of china upon small tables with linen cloths, silver cutlery and crystal glasses, a service comparable to that found in the high-class London restaurants of the period.



Timetable for Imperial Airways' 'Silver Wing' service, 1927.

Today air travel is all about getting from A to B in the quickest time possible. In the 1920s flying was the fastest way to travel and, although speed fitted into the lifestyle of many 'bright young things' in the 'Roaring Twenties', it was not the priority for the majority of airline customers. It was the experience of flying which appealed – and the kudos achieved from doing so. The basic passenger service available at the beginning of the decade had improved considerably by its end, and yet the romance and comfort enjoyed by these early passengers would be taken to a new level during the 1930s.



An Imperial Airways steward serving food to passengers.



# The **BYSTANDER**



**FLYING NUMBER 1/-**

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The *Bystander* magazine produced specific 'Flying Number' issues dedicated to promoting air travel. This colourful, graphic front cover design by Lowen from 1939 features a flying boat landing near an exotic Mediterranean location.

# GLAMOUR AND COMFORT

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IF THE 1920s witnessed the birth of commercial air travel, then the 1930s saw its coming of age. Passengers were provided with a level of comfort unequalled since, and the extent of air routes available across oceans and continents appeared to shrink the world.

Commercial companies continued to promote this new form of transport as a viable alternative to the traditional ways of travelling for those who could afford it. The comfort and service enjoyed by their customers continued to be a priority, and inspiration was drawn from the ocean liners and trains of the period. New aircraft, such as the elegant and graceful Handley Page HP42, were designed and built with this in mind. Sheer luxury never before seen on an aircraft was a feature of their Pullman interiors. Proper wash-basins were fitted in the 'powder rooms', and the best woods and fabrics were used. Seating was researched extensively. Chairs were made that could be adjusted to any position vertically or horizontally. Those on the HP42 were the lightest and most comfortable lounge chairs ever constructed. Call buttons, reading lights and folding tables were incorporated, and passengers were assured of being well looked after by the cabin staff. Stewards offered a silver service, and passengers could enjoy meals of several courses. Dining was a sophisticated procedure, with tables dressed with linen, while silver cutlery and the best crystal were used. A number of companies had bone-china tea sets made that featured their logo. Customers no longer had to board via a ladder but used a few shallow steps, sometimes with a covered walkway attached to them.

Cabin staff had been introduced during the 1920s, but until the 1930s all new recruits were male. During that decade the first female stewardesses were employed by the American company Boeing Air Transport, later to be a part of United Airlines. Ellen Church, a registered nurse from Iowa, initially applied to the company to be a pilot but was turned down. However, she did convince the company of the psychological advantage in having women on board flights. She argued that this would have a calming effect on those customers fearful of flying. There was also the added 'care factor' that the stewardesses were there specifically to look after the passengers. The first stewardesses were registered nurses, and for many years a nursing qualification was a key requirement in the recruitment of stewardesses.

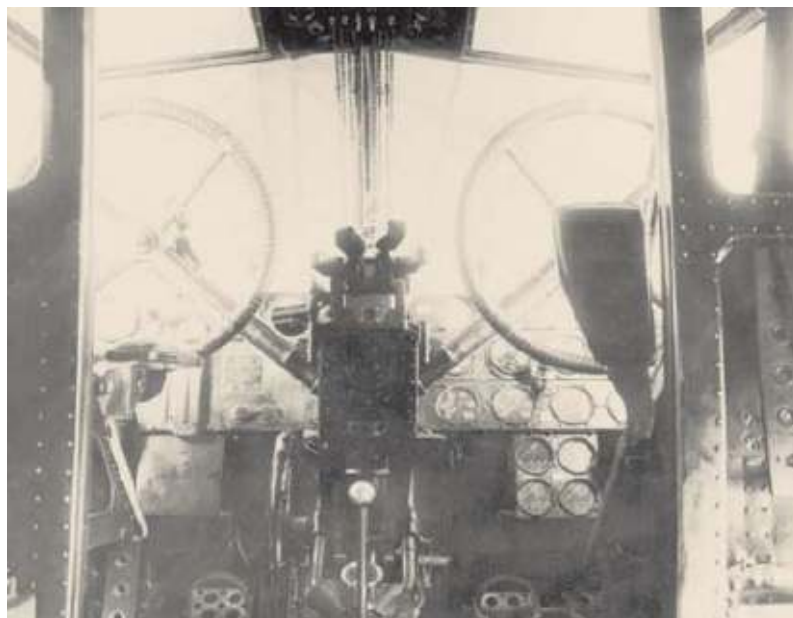


Interior view of the passenger cabin of the Handley Page HP42, known as the 'Winged'

Cunarder' because of the level of comfort, comparable to ocean liners of the day.



Passengers disembarking at night from a four-engine Armstrong Whitworth AW27 Ensign.



View of a Handley Page HP42 cockpit. Note the huge steering-wheel controls used by the crew to manoeuvre the aircraft.

Despite the attention to and focus on the passenger's experience, this was still affected by the technological limitations of the day. Aircraft were now made of metal, and therefore more robust than

their wooden predecessors. Consequently, they were more reliable and offered a greater degree of service regularity, but they were still noisy. Customers were issued with earplugs to help counter this. Some soundproofing was also attempted, with special bulkheads fitted, and the positioning of seats was considered in relation to the vibration felt from the engines. Specially thickened window glass could also be found on some aircraft. Safety continued to be a prime concern, particularly after a number of crashes took place in the early 1930s. The airlines did their best to reassure their customers. Imperial Airways had a policy of using aircraft with four engines for this purpose, and they stressed this in their advertising.

IMPERIAL AIRWAYS  
JUBA

Station JUBA

ARRANGEMENTS FOR 10/8/35

You will be called at 0545 and your baggage should be outside your room at 0615

Breakfast will be served 0615

Currency Coupons will be cashed at PT. 24

The car will leave 0645 at \_\_\_\_\_

The air-liner will leave the airport at 0700 hours to-morrow and stops will be made at Malakal and Khartoum

Meals on to-morrow's journey will be served as shown.

BREAKFAST Juba TEA Khartoum

LUNCH in flight DINNER Khartoum

Mr. Adams the Company's representative, will give to you any further information or assistance you may need during your stay at this station

Information card issued to passengers letting them know the arrangements for a particular day during the journey. Details include timings and the name of the Imperial Airways representative at the station at Juba in Sudan.

With an eye on profitability, the airlines chose to invest in larger aircraft during this period. As a consequence the passenger experience became more 'communal', with numbers increasing from four to six customers on board to between eighteen and twenty, and even rising to forty before the decade was over. There was still plenty of space, however, with passengers having the opportunity to move from their seat to a viewing point or to use a lounge during the journey. Operating on such a scale and incorporating new technological features had an impact on the crews too. Enclosed cockpits became standard and were much more spacious than earlier ones had been. They were almost all fitted with dual controls, and the captain was joined by a first officer and a radio operator. Following pioneering work by the Germans in the 1920s, training in instrument flying became available, and short-haul night flights were offered to the public on some routes for the first time. Until then, all flights had been flown during the day. During the 1930s services continued to stop during the winter and there was no flying on Sundays or bank holidays.



The German Graf Zeppelin LZ 127 shown on a poster advertising the route to South America in 1935.

During this period airlines flew longer distances than ever before. KLM had pioneered long-haul flights in 1925, providing a 9,500-mile service to the Dutch East Indies, and this route was now joined by many others across the world. Sir Alan Cobham had undertaken pioneering survey flights in the 1920s for Imperial Airways. As a result of these, the company, with the help of partners such as Qantas, had established the foundations of their route network by the mid-1930s, providing links between most parts of the British Empire and a number of other countries. These flights had the effect of making the world seem smaller for the first time, but they were a considerable undertaking, with some equating to what today would be an exclusive tour of several weeks. The Imperial Airways service from the United Kingdom to South Africa, available from 1932, could take eleven days and incorporated twenty-eight stops, two railway connections and five different types of aircraft. The trip to Australia took twelve days; this is a long time by today's standard but it was thirty days shorter than making the journey by ship. Following transoceanic survey flights by Charles Lindbergh for Pan Am, the airline started its scheduled service from San Francisco to Hong Kong in 1936, using Glenn Martin 130 flying boats. This 4,000-mile journey took just three days, compared to the three-week journey by ship, for a return fare equal to the average American annual wage. The exclusive comfort

available on these long-distance flights and their image of romance and adventure are epitomised by the airship and the flying boat.

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The colossal airship sheds at Cardington, Bedfordshire, which housed the R101.

Until the *Hindenburg* disaster of 1937, airships were seen as a luxurious way to travel and the best option for long-distance flying by air. They could fly for about forty hours before needing to be refuelled, and in the 1920s, unlike most contemporary aircraft, their capacity enabled them to fly across oceans. Most European countries experimented with airships until crashes, such as that of the R101 in 1928, put a stop to further trials. Germany, however, persevered and launched the Graf Zeppelin in September 1928. The size of four modern jumbo jets, it flew twenty passengers on a worldwide trip. With the airship moored close to the ground, the passengers and crew could board by climbing a short flight of steps built into the gondola. Full kitchen facilities, a dining room and bedrooms with windows were available. Between 1936 and 1937 the *Hindenburg* undertook ten trips across the Atlantic. Passengers enjoyed a very comfortable, warm and quiet journey. The main compartments, such as the dining room and lounge, were large and spacious; styled by Professor Friedrich Breuhaus, they had a clean, modern look. The tables and chairs were made from lightweight tubular aluminium, and the walls were decorated with silk wallpaper. With luxurious facilities comparable to those found on board contemporary ocean liners, travelling by airship was a majestic way to fly, the like of which has not been experienced since.



A passenger cabin on the Graf Zeppelin LZ 127, showing the sleeping accommodation. The

Flying boats were another wonder of the age. They were a prestigious form of transport that featured in the movies of the time. An awe-inspiring sight, these large and spacious aircraft gracefully took off and landed on water, offering a first-class service for no more than forty passengers at a time. For the first time two decks were incorporated into aircraft design. On the Short S.23 Empire Class flying boat, for example, the crew, mail and luggage occupied the top 'flight deck' while the passengers were seated on the lower deck, where they could enjoy a library, a smoking room and a promenade area. There was also a fully equipped kitchen and well-stocked bar. Imperial Airways used a variety of flying boats over the years on their Empire routes to places such as South Africa. Because flying boats were able to make use of lakes, seas and oceans located along the routes, it was felt that this form of aircraft was a cheaper option than building new airstrips on land. They were also seen as safer in this respect than land-planes as their routes tended to take them over large amounts of water. They would have the option to come down safely if difficulties arose. Because they flew in warmer, more humid climates, leather padded seats and wood were used instead of fabric on board. Sleeping berths were available on some flying boats, but generally long-distance flights were completed in stages during the daytime. At stops along the way the passengers disembarked via motor launches and were conveyed to first-class accommodation provided nearby. The fares for these journeys continued to be very expensive but did include the cost of the additional transport, food and lodging that were a feature of the journey.



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