



Why the 747 Is Such a Badass Plane

"The plane that's a ship. The ship that's a plane."



By [Eric Tegler](#) Jan 17, 2018

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On August 3, 1970, Pan Am 747 "Clipper Victor," lifted off from JFK for San Juan, carrying 359 passengers and 19 crew. Flight 299 was a "redeye," one of the first regularly scheduled routes since Pan Am inaugurated Boeing 747 service back in January.

Aboard was Esther de la Fuente, one of the first 747 flight attendants. In mid-flight, she was approached by a short, bearded man wearing a beret. "I want to go to Cuba," he said. Esther thought he was joking and responded airily, "No. Let's go to Rio. It's a lot more fun at this time of year."

Then he pulled out a gun, and [the first ever 747 hijacking was underway](#).

Clipper Victor's Captain, Augustus Watkins, declared an emergency and diverted for Havana. Flight 299 touched down at 5:31 am at Jose Marti Airport under the gaze of Fidel Castro.

As stunned passengers gathered their thoughts, Watkins exited the airplane with the hijacker, soon finding himself face-to-face with Castro. The Cuban leader then unloaded question after question about the flying behemoth, the largest airplane to ever land in his country.

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It was the first time he had ever seen one with his own eyes.

A "Big" Deal





The first 747 rollout in Everett, Washington, September 30, 1968.

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Five years before Wakins was forced to set down in Havana, Pan Am president Juan Trippe asked Boeing CEO Bill Allen for a long-range airliner twice the size of a 707 in order to circumvent the problem of limited gates at airports. Boeing designer Joe Sutter incorporated design influences from the contemporary program that produced the huge Lockheed C-5 Galaxy airlifter. Three airframe designs were considered for the 747 with first one stacking one 707 fuselage on top of another, according to Boeing historian Michael Lombardi.

“The first idea was an airplane that looks a lot like the A380,” Lombardi told *Popular Mechanics*. “They dropped that because they couldn’t evacuate the cabin quickly enough in an emergency. Then they thought of two fuselages side-by-side, the idea of the twin-aisle, widebody airplane.”

This basic idea has been the model for all widebodies since.



In a world full of widebody airliners including the Airbus A380, people forget the 747’s

mammoth size and its status as a prestige aircraft. Dubbed the “Jumbo Jet” by the media, the 747-100 was about 1.5 times as large as a Boeing 707 and could carry 440 passengers compared to the 707’s modest 189 headcount. In fact the airplane was so large, Boeing had to build a new factory in Everett, Washington, just for assembly and it remains the largest building by volume in the world.

The 747’s distinctive “hump” derived from Boeing’s expectation that supersonic airliners, like the SST being designed concurrently at Boeing, would eventually take over international routes. So the 747 was designed as a freighter with a hump accommodating a nose hatch below the cockpit and a large side door behind it.

While the supersonic dream was ultimately a commercial failure ([for now](#)), the 747 became an icon of industrial design. Along with numerous aerodynamic innovations, it was the first commercial aircraft to incorporate high-bypass turbofan engines like those developed for the C-5. The Jumbo also pioneered commercial autopilot for landing and quadruple main landing gear.

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The Party Queen



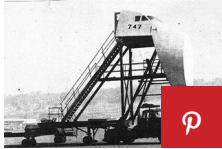
Boeing 747 takes off for its first flight, February 9, 1969.

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Because of its unprecedented size, Boeing worried that the 747 would be difficult to operate. But designers and test pilots labored to make an airplane easy to handle, whether on the ground or in the air. Before the prototype was completed, designers

improvised a mock-up cockpit mounted on the roof of a truck to simulate taxiing an airliner whose cockpit was 35 feet above the ground.

Boeing's efforts paid off. Pilots describe the benign-handling 747 as like "flying a giant Piper J-3 Cub," an airplane 10 times smaller than Boeing's aerial monster.



Waddell's Wagon, used for training ground crews for taxiing the massive 747.
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Finished after just 28 months, the first of many 747s made its first flight on February 9, 1969, with its first commercial passenger flight arriving on January 22, 1970, on Pan Am's New York-London route.

The pilots' love for the 747 is only matched by the millions of passengers who've boarded any one of the 1,540 747s made ever since. "Whether it was because it was a new aircraft or they were scared," Pam Am Flight Director, Jay Koren remembered, "all the passengers drank like crazy."

From its generous economy seats to its upstairs bar/lounge, the 747 was a flying status symbol that rivaled the stylish European Concorde. What it lacked in speed it more than made up for in comfort.

"WHETHER IT WAS BECAUSE IT WAS A NEW AIRCRAFT OR THEY WERE SCARED, ALL THE PASSENGERS DRANK LIKE CRAZY."

"When it came out, it was a must-have airplane," Lombardi says. "Airlines were buying it because they wanted it as a flagship, even if they really didn't have a place for it."

In many ways, it was the first plane to truly modernize air travel. Lombardi says the 747's passenger capacity lowered seat/fare costs. Although its development costs and the early 70s recession/oil crisis nearly bankrupted Boeing, it became a long-term moneymaker.

A Versatile Giant



A Space Shuttle prototype is mounted on a Boeing 747 Shuttle Carrier aircraft, 1977.

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Despite the last 747 passenger flight by a U.S. domestic airline [on January 3, 2018](#), over 400 747s continue in service worldwide. Eight different commercial variants have been built including the still-in-production 747-8F freighter version. While its days as an airliner are numbered thanks to more efficient, slightly smaller airplanes like Boeing's own 777, the 747's size and cargo-oriented design will keep it flying freight for decades to come says Lombardi.

The Jumbo continues to serve as the VC-25, known as Air Force One when the President is aboard, and as America's National Airborne Operations Center as the E-4B. China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia all use 747s for their heads-of-state. 747s have carried everything from [the experimental Airborne Laser](#) to [the Space Shuttle](#), acted as [super fire tankers](#), and carried [metal band Iron Maiden](#) on tour as "Ed Force One."



Air Force One

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Lombardi can think of no other airplane which has crossed the Pacific as often as the 747. "Being captain of this flagship airplane, was the greatest job in the airlines," Lombardi adds.

No doubt Castro would agree though he would never tour the inside of his temporarily captive 747. After taking the dictator on a walk-around tour of the plane, Watkins offered to take him aboard. "I would probably scare the passengers," Premier Castro said. Minutes later, Watkins lined Clipper Victor up for takeoff and headed for Miami and an FBI-debriefing.

Flight 299 finally landed in San Juan at 10:45 am, about seven hours late.

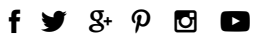


Tucson's Pinal Airpark, the final resting place of Delta's retired 747 fleet. The final 747, nicknamed 'The Queen,' joined the boneyard on January 3, 2018.

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