

The Girl on the Magic Carpet : Thirty Years of Swissair Hostesses

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

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THE GIRL ON THE MAGIC CARPET

THIRTY YEARS OF SWISSAIR HOSTESSES

"Good morning, Madam!" was the friendly welcome I was given by an attractive stewardess as I boarded Swissair's latest Coronado plane at Kloten, Zurich's international airport, on a brilliant morning in May. I had flown many thousands of miles since my first flight from London to Basle a few years before the war. This time everything was different — the previous day I had had the privilege of being taken over Kloten Airport on an information tour, and I now looked at an air stewardess in quite a different way. No longer did she appear to me just a pretty and efficient member of staff on the plane I happened to travel on. I now looked with great respect at the young woman knowing that she was a carefully chosen, extremely well-trained person with a highly developed sense of responsibility.

I remember my first flight in a fourteen seater twin-engine Douglas DC-2 across the Channel. I can still picture the stewardess kindly and thoughtfully helping me with my baby. This courtesy and consideration has remained a hallmark of the Swissair stewardess, now complemented by greater efficiency and versatility as technical progress has made aircraft bigger and bigger and flying time shorter and shorter.

Thirty years ago, Swissair introduced the first stewardess in Europe. It was after the Curtiss Condor, the American twin-engined plane had been put into operation that stewardesses were thought necessary to look after the "large" number of passengers. Fifteen or sixteen was indeed a considerable number at that time — the previous "sensational speed plane", the Lockheed Orion capable of 162 m.p.h. had accommodation for four passengers only.

At the outbreak of the war, at the end of August 1939, Swissair had to suspend regular services. They were not resumed until 30th July 1945, when the fleet was enlarged by several DC-3s. During the war enormous technical progress had been made, and air transport developed rapidly. Swissair soon became an important participant in world-wide air traffic.

Today, Switzerland runs services as far North as Stockholm, into Africa as far South as Accra, to the East as far as Manila and Tokio, and to the West reaching Montreal, Chicago and Santiago. At the end of 1931, the staff had totalled 64, in 1946 nearly eight hundred and in 1963, with a fleet of over thirty aircraft Swissair employed a total of 8,471, of whom over two thousand worked in ninety-two branch offices outside Switzerland. This number included over three hundred stewardesses or, as Swissair calls them, air hostesses.

After the war, when air hostess developed into a recognised vocation for a girl, it became one of the most dreamed-about occupations for a young Swiss girl. The idea of doing a job up in the air and flying to faraway countries, on a sort of magic carpet, attracted young girls in their teens and early twenties. It is not surprising as hardly any other occupation offers as much variety, the chance of gaining knowledge through contact with men and women from all parts of the globe, and as much adventure as that of a hostess travelling above oceans and continents.

What are the requirements for a prospective candidate? The prospectus lists enthusiasm and enjoying contact with people of many nationalities as number one. Next come devotion and sense of co-operation and positive attitude. Only after these important points are listed the

more factual requirements, age (21-29), Swiss citizenship (essential), status (must be single), pleasing appearance (no overweight). Good knowledge of English, French and German is imperative and ability to converse fluently in these languages. A good general education is required, too, and knowledge of other languages and nursing experience are an asset.

About eight hundred girls wishing to become air hostesses apply every year. The intake is between 100-120 per annum. Each application form is carefully scrutinised. It contains two photos (passport and full length) and a handwritten curriculum vitae. Details the applicant has to supply include weight and height, whether glasses are worn and whether swimming is amongst the accomplishments, and where, if any, the experience with children was acquired. Out of the total eight hundred, some three hundred are invited to an interview and suitability test. Selection takes place several times a year. I was told that most air hostesses are from the German-speaking part of Switzerland, and that there are nearly as many Ticinese girls as from the Suisse Romande.

In the first interview with the Chief Hostess or her deputy, experienced air hostesses both, the candidate is asked a multitude of questions in order to gauge a young lady's abilities and character. She is also weighed and measured. In this interview, special stress is put on the language test. Her arithmetic skill and her memory are tested. The answers are put on a selection report sheet. Special points regarding the candidate's appearance, make-up, posture, manners, etc., are noted.

"What is your reason for wanting to be an air hostess?" is usually answered by "The wish to travel". "Swissair gives you travel; what do you give Swissair?" No doubt, the answers vary but are usually calculated to make the right impression. In order to ensure that they are really indicative of the true personality behind the young woman, another interview takes place by way of a projective test with the Superintendent of the Selection Office Flying Personnel. Then the applicant is given a set of intelligence tests and some others evaluating the level of general personality.

The candidates spend a whole day at the centre. They take part in a discussion group, and at the communal luncheon they wait on the members of the selection team. The team then pool their impressions, evaluations, assessments and test results, and provided the medical report is also satisfactory, the successful candidate is called up for training.

There are six courses every year, each lasting about seven weeks. The timetable of the courses is well packed with lectures, films, demonstrations and practical work. Lectures range from history and development of Swissair, public relations, the workings of an aircraft, to the task of the crew and the work of the ground hostess. Rules and regulations have to be learnt, governing a variety of matters: uniform, accounts, meal plans, foreign exchange and customs duties, sale of spirits and cigarettes and other duty-free goods, etc. Instruction covers preparation and serving of regular meals, refreshments, snacks and drinks. Of great importance is first aid and emergency drill with fire and water (ditching drill takes place at the swimming pool), rapid decompression and the use of the hot towel pack (a Japanese custom). Child care is studied, and a night and a day have to be spent in the maternity ward of the Cantonal Hospital to acquire the rudiments of emer-

gency midwifery.

The "Cabin attendants' handbook" is carefully studied, and one of the most important subjects is how to treat passengers. English and French are regular subjects in the curriculum, and there is speech training, specially with the use of a loudspeaker. Hairstyling and make-up lessons are given.

The students have ample opportunity of inspecting the real aircraft, of studying models and of having practical demonstrations and training in life-sized model aircraft sections of the type to be flown during the first year. It is vital that an air hostess not only knows the seating capacity of a plane and whether the pantry or the lavatory are at the back or in the front, but that she is able, blind-fold if necessary, to find fire extinguishers, torches, blankets, first aid kits, etc.

A lot to learn you will say, but it is rewarding training. After some seven weeks and a number of examinations the lucky ones are ready to go on duty, neat and trim in their tailor-made blue uniforms and crisp white blouses. At first they are on three months' probation. Their initial flying is mainly within Europe. When they are familiar with the Metropolitan and the Caravelle and the European network, they are put on other routes, on the Middle East, North Atlantic and later on the South Atlantic and Far Eastern services. Refresher courses are necessary as new types of aircraft become operational.

How many hours does a hostess fly? An average and a maximum time has been fixed, but generally it works out between sixty and ninety flying hours a month, forty to fifty hours of attendance and about four days on call.

The air hostesses are the charge of group chiefs, twenty-eight girls at the time. This senior job may be reached after about three years of outstanding service. Quality always ranks above seniority. The hostesses are checked on duty flights every now and then by a group chief travelling with them, usually on duty as well. Her findings, criticism and praise are put on record. The first contract is signed after the probation period has been successfully accomplished.

I was privileged to watch an air hostess selection in progress. Later I sat in on a lesson about how to make up expenses sheets. Thirty-four students, eighteen hostesses and sixteen stewards were assembled in the sunny, well-equipped class room. I was also invited to an excellent lunch in the staff canteen, and I was shown over the friendly lounge and to the hostesses' changing room with its showers and lockers and large looking glasses. I even bought air hostess stockings from a slot machine — three in a packet for Fr.4.—. I was intrigued by a large kind of letter box aperture and was told that the hostesses put their dirty blouses and aprons in there. They are then laundered at Swissair's own up-to-date laundry and put back clean and neat into the individual locker, the number of the tag on the clothes agreeing with that on the locker.

The average employment of a hostess is three years. If she stays in the service of Swissair, other functions are assigned to her after the age of forty. I met some of the senior hostesses in responsible leading positions, and I was most favourably impressed by their efficiency and intelligence, always tinged with a natural friendliness.

One of these senior hostesses with seven years of service to her credit was doing the briefing which I found most interesting. This takes place about an hour before departure. The air hostess team, sometimes attended by a steward, report for duty, made up and dressed for the

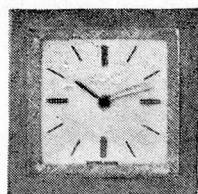
flight, all either with or without the jacket and/or overcoat according to the weather — but all must be dressed alike. They have to be on board half an hour or forty-five minutes before take-off, according to the size of the plane. In the briefing the girls are asked questions regarding their individual duties. What kind of food do they serve? What kind of loose equipment and where is it in the particular aircraft they are about to fly. What has to be locked up in Frankfurt on the flight from Zurich to Düsseldorf via Frankfurt? (Bar, cigarettes and first aid kit). How many safety vests are in the "Metropolitan"? Where are the oxygen masks? How many passengers on this afternoon's flight from Geneva to Nice? What may be imported into Czechoslovakia? How is a non-alcoholic cocktail made? If a V.I.P. is expected on the plane, the hostesses are shown a picture in the briefing room. (I flew back with Sir Stanley Rous the next day — so I knew just why the air hostess was able to pick him out immediately!)

The work of an air hostess is important. It is well paid, with holidays from three to five weeks according to length of service. Compensation for board and lodging abroad is paid, two-thirds of the cost of the uniform is borne by Swissair. There are leisure organisations, free flights and a lump sum on retirement.

The job of an air hostess is an exacting as well as an exciting one. Her duty is to make the passenger happy, to guess his wishes and to satisfy his whims. No good hostess ever says "I have no time". She may stall and pacify, but she attends to all requests in time. She has to fit her work into twenty minutes on a short flight, without appearing to hurry, or into three hours on a longer trip and make it look as if her jobs were made to measure! The teacher in the class I watched declared categorically "There is no forgetting". This means she has to remember that the distance between Zurich and New York is 6,250 and between Geneva and Lisbon 1,592 km., that Rio has 3.1 million inhabitants and Turkey's population is 26.7 million. She has to remember to put a label on a defective piece of equipment, enter it in the board book or report it to the co-pilot. She must remain polite and friendly with rude and tiresome passengers, she must keep calm in an emergency. Glamour? Certainly, but also much hard work.

She will be blamed for things which go wrong and receive hardly any thanks if all goes well. But she gets the satisfaction of a job well done and knows the satisfied traveller will use her airline again, and that is her first aim and biggest reward.

Mariann.



H. KAUFMANN

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