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HD **A tale of two airports: Dubai v Changi**  
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Cover story

It's not just the airlines slugging it out for the world's three **billion** air passengers - it's the major hubs, too. In this road test of the two most important airports for Australians, Michael Gebicki hangs out for two days at Dubai International Airport, which already boasts more passengers than Singapore's Changi, where Robert Upe, going nowhere fast, spends 48 hours.

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## DUBAI INTERNATIONAL

Even though Dubai International Airport is one of the world's largest buildings measured by floor space, it can still feel like an airport in constant catch-up mode, bursting at the seams.

In 2013, its 66.5 **million** passenger movements made Dubai the world's second busiest international airport after Heathrow - and it's on target to take the number-one spot in 2015.

By 2020, the airport predicts passenger traffic to pass the 100-**million** mark. Much of that success is down to location. "A third of the world's population lives within four hours' flight time. Stretch that to eight hours flying and you lasso another third," says Julius Baumann, corporate communication manager for Dubai Airports.

Since Qantas now uses Dubai as its major hub for connecting flights aboard Emirates to Europe, Africa and the Middle East, and with Emirates itself now offering frequent flights out of Melbourne and Sydney plus three other state capitals, Australian travellers are going to be seeing a lot more of Dubai International Airport. The airport has three terminals and most passengers travelling to and from Australia will arrive and depart from Terminal 3, which is used by all Emirates and Qantas flights.

This terminal has three concourses, with a fourth, Concourse D, to open next year. Concourse C is now used for non-Emirates airlines, which will migrate to Concourse D when it opens. Most Australians are only ever going to see the inside of Concourse A and **B**, and they're quite different. Concourse **B** is for non-A380 Emirates flights. Typically this will be where an Australian passenger will **board** or disembark a flight heading for a European port, and depending on when you arrive, it can feel jammed.

The concourse is at its busiest in the early morning, which is when several flights from Australia arrive, with connecting flights to Europe departing from about 7am onwards. The central complex of duty-free shops and food and beverage outlets feeds off a central aisle which is already narrow for its purpose. Passengers passing along it are impeded by retail stalls set along the middle of the aisle.

For passengers looking for something quieter, Concourse **B** has a pay-for-use Marhaba Lounge, located close to boarding gate B23. This offers the usual executive-lounge array of hot and cold buffet food and beverages and showers. At a cost of \$52 for up to four hours' use, the price is steep enough to deter most travellers, and offers a refuge of relative calm.

Passengers with a couple of hours or more between flights have another option in the G-Force Health Club, located one level above the main concourse. At a cost of \$40, the health club includes a gym, small heated pool, separate steam rooms for men and women, sauna, showers, towels and toiletries, available 24/7. On the same level is the Timeless Spa, open from 8am to 8pm and offering treatments starting from \$97.

Wi-Fi is free in Concourse **B**, but at busy times it struggles to keep up with demand. Power outlets are three-pin, UK-pattern and hard to find.

Opened in January 2013, Concourse A is the world's first and only purpose-built, stand-alone facility dedicated exclusively to A380 flights. This is where Dubai Airport puts its best foot forward. Lighter, brighter and more pleasing in every way, Concourse A was developed in close consultation with Emirates, a reflection of the airport's role as the home base for the airline, operator of the world's largest fleet of A380 aircraft, with 50 in the skies and another 46 on order.

## CHANGI INTERNATIONAL

Like the character Tom Hanks plays in *The Terminal*, about a man living at an airport, I have arrived at Changi to "live" there and test its claims of being the best. I'll eat, drink, shop and sleep here, but just for 48 hours. I'm not roughing it like Hanks' character, because I've checked in to the Crowne Plaza Hotel that is part of the three-terminal complex connected by a rather speedy skytrain system.

With jet engines roaring all around - a flight takes off every 90 seconds and 53.7 **million** passengers move through the airport each year - the hotel is that cliched oasis of calm. My room, with views of the control tower, is quiet and chic. There are classy restaurants in the hotel, trendy lounge areas and arrival and departure boards at reception so you can keep tabs on your flight.

There are also tropical rainforest gardens and a swimming pool with small vegetation-covered islands. Close your eyes and you could be in Fiji. After collecting my bags, I stroll to the hotel along a covered walkway from Terminal 3 and kick off my shoes in the room in no time. Moving through the airport is a cinch.

Changi aims to clear passengers from the aerobridge within two minutes, through immigration within eight minutes and to have all bags on the carousel within 25 minutes, even from an A380 carrying more than 500 passengers. These time targets are easily met when I arrive. Changi is one of the most customer focused, hi-tech and connected airports in the world and last year it registered a record score in its category in the annual Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore, which is carried out by the Institute of Service Excellence.

I drop into the call centre where customer service is clearly paramount. Phones are being answered, replies are being sent to Twitter and the Facebook page is being updated.

Changi is also active on Instagram and aims to respond to social media posts within hours. Sometimes, the response is even better. While I'm there, a tweet arrives from a disgruntled passenger who says it is too cold in a departure lounge. The call centre takes immediate action by dispatching an engineer to access the problem.

And you should see what's going on in the toilets. All of them are equipped with touchscreen feedback kiosks with five smiley faces that ask users to rate the loos from excellent to very poor. A bad rating will have a cleaner scurrying to the scene within minutes and a wet floor could be mopped while the complainant is still there.

This feedback system is also in action at check-in, immigration, information counters and at food and beverage outlets.

It is part of a \$US3.8 **million** "One Changi" centralised platform that allows the airport to respond to problems in real time, but also to share feedback with staff (such as toilet cleaners) and tenants (such as shops) so they can improve their performance.

## FREQUENT FLYERS'

### BEST AND WORST

Darrel Wade, co-founder, Intrepid Travel

Singapore is a good airport but has lost some of its efficiency since the number of terminals has expanded. Cross-terminal transfers are not always as smooth as they could be. My new favourite airport is (unbelievably) LAX, or more particularly the Tom Bradley terminal. This skyrockets from being

arguably the worst terminal in the world to one of the best. The design is spacious and modern, there is great food, lounges and shops. [intrepidtravel.com](http://intrepidtravel.com)

Tony Wheeler, Lonely Planet founder

Changi gets all the kudos but it has a big drawback - it puts you through security at the gate, not with immigration like most airports. What happens if you go through that gate security and the flight is delayed? Do you want to go back through security and repeat the hassle? No, so you're stuck at the gate. What happens if an X-ray machine malfunctions? No problem if it's one of 10 or 20 at terminal security, but a real hassle if it's one of only one or two at the gate.

Adam Susz, Australian-based Boeing 747 pilot

Singapore is right up there as one of the favoured airports for pilots. Its operation is efficient and orderly. There are two parallel runways, one for arrivals and one for departures that separate and smooth traffic. **Hong Kong's** airport is up there, too, but there is some mountainous terrain. New York's JFK is among the most difficult. It's so busy and old.

Lee Abbamonte, youngest American to visit every country

My favourite is Changi, followed by **Hong Kong**, Incheon [Seoul] and Haneda [Tokyo] - Asian airports and airlines are the best. The worst airports are generally in Africa. Lagos, Nigeria, is the worst. It is filthy, confusing and full of people trying to rip you off. See [leeabbamonte.com](http://leeabbamonte.com)

Sue Badyari, chief executive, World Expeditions

My favourite is Tenzing-Hillary airport in Lukla that provides the gateway into Nepal's Everest region at 2800 metres. The runway is 460 metres long at a 12 per cent gradient and on approach it looks like a small Bandaid on the mountainscape. The 35-minute flight between Kathmandu and Lukla is simply stunning, with views of some of the most famous of the Himalayan ranges.

See [worldexpeditions.com](http://worldexpeditions.com)

Duty-free outlets, cafes, bars and restaurants are staggered rather than clumped, the soaring roof provides a flood of natural light, and in the quieter wings of the concourse, reclined lounge-style seating with footrests the possibility of a snooze in relative comfort.

Dining also gets a shot in the arm here with options ranging from casual and relaxed to fine dining, with names such as Carluccio's, Le Pain Quotidien, Giraffe and the Moët & Chandon Champagne Bar.

If you arrive on an A380 with a connecting flight departing from Concourse **B** and nowhere else to go but the public facilities, your best strategy is to remain in Concourse A for as long as possible. You need to allow 10 minutes for the train connection between Concourse A and **B** and it can take 20 minutes at a good clip to reach your boarding gate.

Where Concourse A breaks new ground is in its first- and **business**-class lounges. Located on the two upper levels of the concourse, these lounges run the entire length of the concourse, each spanning an area of 29,000 square metres. Travellers using them have elevators to take them direct to their boarding gate.

From the buffet to the smoking room, the magazine racks, the shower rooms and the computer-equipped **business** area, the **business**-class lounge is on an imperial scale. Apart from the shoeshine, there is nothing too novel about the facilities, but the size alone is impressive.

The first-class lounge is hushed, polite and perfumed with the scent of power. The lounge features a clubby cigar lounge with a range of Cuba's finest, complimentary treatments in the Timeless Spa, dedicated relax rooms with blankets and pillows, and a plush restaurant with food cooked to order. You may kick off with an rocket salad with goats **cheese** and pine nuts, or a foie gras terrine, followed by a beef tenderloin with potato foam and spinach cream.

The first-class lounge even has its own duty-free shopping area. The highlight of the bottle shop is a \$216,000 diamond-encrusted bottle of whisky, something no self-respecting sheikh should be without.

Passengers with a stopover of several hours and in need of a hotel room have a couple of options. Dubai International Hotel has guest rooms in two locations in Concourse A and **B** in Terminal 3. They're hard to find but when I exit the aircraft in Concourse **B** I'm met and escorted to the check-in desk, which is standard procedure. Rooms are available on a four-, six- or 24-hour basis.

My room overlooks the main concourse. Although it's busy throughout the night, soundproofing is excellent. Furnishings are slightly bland and strictly functional, but the queen-size bed is comfortable. Internet in the room is much faster than the free concourse Wi-Fi. There are no tea-making facilities but my room has a capsule coffee machine. There's a bath, shower, a powerful hair dryer, and an iron. Guests have free access to the G-Force Health Club. Room rates start at \$187 for a 24-hour booking.

Dubai International Hotel is a practical choice for passengers with a stopover of less than 12 hours. Those with more time may be better off at one of the hotels close to the airport. My second night is at Le Meridien Dubai, a five-minute drive from the terminal. The room is smartly tailored and overlooks a garden. There's free Wi-Fi, five swimming pools, a spa and a choice of 18 restaurants and bars. Rooms start at \$157.

When I return to the airport for my connecting flight, passage through immigration and security is swift and painless, although some passengers report delays. Best buys at the airport's duty-free outlets include alcohol, tobacco and chocolates. Prices on cosmetics and perfumes are only slightly less keen, but bargains are hard to come by on electronic goods and cameras.

Service throughout is cheerful and efficient. For the two days I'm in Dubai I've opted not to collect my checked luggage but live out of my carry-on. Since it's a break of more than 24 hours, my luggage cannot be checked through to Istanbul, my final destination. This requires a trip to the transfer desk to have my baggage tag scanned, my bag located in the holding area and loaded onto the connecting flight. I foresee potential disaster.

At the transfer desk the staffer is crisply professional, dealing with me while answering a phone call in French. When I get to Istanbul, my bag is already circling when I arrive at the carousel. Michael Gebicki

The writer travelled as a guest of Emirates. See [emirates.com](http://emirates.com); [dubaiairport.com](http://dubaiairport.com)

WORLD'S BEST

CHANGI, SINGAPORE

INCHEON, KOREA

MUNICH, GERMANY

**HONG KONG**

SCHIPHOL, HOLLAND

TOKYO (HANEDA)

BEIJING, **CHINA**

ZURICH, SWITZERLAND

VANCOUVER, CANADA

HEATHROW, LONDON

Source: Skytrax World's Best Airports 2014 survey

At Terminal 1, I spot a bride and her entourage having their wedding photos taken. "It's quite common," says my airport minder. And why wouldn't it be?

There are five themed gardens at Changi, tended by 200 gardeners. The two-storey butterfly garden has jungle plants and 1000 butterflies native to Singapore and Malaysia. It has timber walkways and an indoor six-metre waterfall.

If the humidity plays havoc with the bride's make-up, she can always head to the rooftop sunflower garden with 500 plants, the orchid garden with a pond full of koi, the rooftop cactus garden with a bar, or the enchanted garden with four giant glass bouquet sculptures filled with plants. As visitors walk through this last garden, it comes alive with sounds.

All gardens are free, but if you want to relax by the airport's Balinese-themed outdoor rooftop pool it will cost \$S14. There are sun lounges and cabanas around the water and a bar that also serves food.

It's a relaxing place to hang out while waiting for a plane, or you could instead check-in to one of the airport's three Ambassador Transit Hotels.

Sound-proof ensuite rooms, some with runway views, can be booked in a block of six hours for about \$75 and then \$16 for each extra hour. If you book in, you also get free pool access. It pays to book for transit hotels well ahead.

Besides lush greenery and natural light, Changi's three terminals offer art installations such as the impressive moving sculpture Kinetic Rain that has 608 suspended copper-plated raindrops, which are choreographed to move into different shapes.

There are also four cinemas, a four-storey slide, a nine-metre social tree on which you can attach a digital photo of yourself for posterity, fitness and massage centres, children's playgrounds, 350 shops and 120 food and beverage outlets.

Time-poor passengers can shop via the airport's online retail portal [ishopchangi.com](http://ishopchangi.com) and pick up their purchases from collection points in each terminal.

Instead of trinkets and duty free, I try some of the regional food on offer. There are no Michelin chefs at the airport, but decent choices from humble snack food such as a mackerel otah (\$2.60), honeyed pork (\$45 a kilogram) that can be vacuum-sealed for international air travel and the dreaded durian fruit that you either love or loathe. I try two durian puffs (\$2.40) and have to turn my nose up at them.

One of Singapore's prized cuisines is crab - either with pepper or chilli. And you can get it at the airport. I try a black pepper crab (\$64 a kilogram) at Seafood Paradise and while it is OK, it actually fails to meet the lofty standards set by other Singaporean restaurants.

If you still feel the need to get out of the airport, there are free two-hour Singapore tours for transit passengers to places such as **Chinatown**, Little India, Marina Bay Sands and Raffles Hotel.

Skyscanner's recent "Future of Travel Report" says airports will eventually become entirely automated. Skyscanner says biometric scanning (instead of passports), self-service check-ins and digital boarding via mobile are just a few of the innovations planned, along with virtual concierges and stores with showroom products that you scan to **buy** and then have them delivered to your home, without having to carry them on the plane.

Many of these technologies are already being slated for use in Changi's fourth terminal, due to open in 2017.

Greg Fordham, the managing director of Airbiz, says: "In five years' time, there will be no need for a single human agent in the terminal. An entirely automated airport journey will see the passenger take complete control, while an optimised team of multi-lingual and multi-skilled airport staff will concentrate on assisting those who need it."

Let's hope one of those people on the optimised team is Tan Beng Luan. Changi's employee of the year in 2013 went to the aid of a Polish family left stranded at the airport, because of a mix-up with airline tickets.

When Beng Luan came across them, they had spent one night at the terminal, had nowhere to stay, no valid return tickets and their luggage had been lost.

She took them home to give them something to eat and somewhere to sleep, took a day off work the next day to take them sightseeing, located their luggage and then bought them three tickets so they could fly home. One of the family later wrote: "Tan Beng Luan, working in lost and found at Changi Airport, is the kindest and most helpful person I have ever met in my life."

The writer travelled as a guest of Changi Airport. [changiairport.com](http://changiairport.com)

TERMINAL VELOCITY

CHANGI AND DUBAI

BY THE NUMBERS

DUBAI

66.43 **million** passengers

125 airlines operating

260 destinations served on six continents.

1.97 **million** sqm under cover

7114 aircraft movements weekly

243 check-in counters

90km baggage belts in Terminal 3

CHANGI

53.7 **million** passengers

12,000 free baggage trolleys

1000 butterflies

6900 flights each week

919 skylights in Terminal 3

100 airlines

550 free internet terminals (free Wi-Fi throughout the airport)

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