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## *Miami*

Flight attendant Lola Torres used to pack seven pairs of white gloves on trips so she never wore one soiled. Carmen Reyes met airline-imposed weight limits with a "caviar diet"—four servings a day of the delicacy acquired cheaply on layovers in Tehran.

At a reunion of 600 Pan American Airlines alumni last weekend in Miami, former employees got together to share stories of glamour and history, from the Beatles, kings and presidents to Vietnam orphan airlifts and hijackings. The memories flowed as freely as the Dom Pérignon they used to pour. And they can still do a perfect "clipper dip," where a flight attendant royally bends at the knees to pour beverages rather than leaning over passengers.

"We were shoehorned into history just by showing up to work," said Rebecca Sprecher, who became a stewardess in 1972 two weeks after graduating from college. "You never knew who you were going to meet or what was going to happen."

A stroll down the Pan Am memory runway highlights the dramatic changes in air travel since the airline was founded in 1927 by Juan Trippe to carry mail to South America. Within a year, he realized that putting wicker chairs and passengers on planes would improve the finances, paving the way for carriers around the world. Pan Am crossed oceans with flying boats and launched the jumbo-jet Boeing 747 in 1970.

In its heyday, the airline served seven-course meals cooked on board and sported perfectly coiffed flight attendants assisting passengers in suits and ties. The era is depicted on TV with ABC's "Pan Am," a Sunday night drama that had a promising start this fall but has slipped to about 5.7 million viewers in its most-recent episode, according to Nielsen ratings.

Pan Am, which ceased operations in bankruptcy in 1991, represents an era of sky-high fares that made flying available only to the well-to-do. A ticket from New York to Buenos Aires on Pan Am cost \$1,000 in 1974, and today costs about \$1,000, notes Zsolt Monostory, who met his wife, a flight attendant, on a Pan Am flight in 1978. "I'm not surprised things have gone downhill," he said. "First class now is not the same as first class then. Don't fool yourself."

The market does still exist for grace in the sky, but it's very small. Singapore Airlines,

which still maintains strict grooming standards for flight attendants, offers private first-class cabins on its A380 jumbo jets. [Lufthansa](#) has a first-class terminal in Frankfurt with white-tablecloth dining, bathtubs with rubber duckies and luxury-car rides right out to airplane stairs.

The Pan Am Worldwide Family Reunion was organized by Pan Amigo News, a newsletter that has operated since the airline folded. The gathering was held in Pan Am's original seaplane terminal in Miami and included tours of city hall led by Miami Mayor Tomas Regalado. The event, one of several periodic Pan Am reunions, culminated in a gala held in a former Coast Guard hangar.

Carmen Ongay, who started working for Pan Am in 1962 and learned tricks like fluffing scrambled eggs with soda water for coach passengers, put off a scholarship offer to the London School of Economics after college in Puerto Rico to take an offer from Pan Am. She thought it might be fun to be a flight attendant for six months, but once she got a taste, she couldn't give it up. She's been a flight attendant for 50 years, now flying for [Delta Air Lines](#).

"It was a way of life," she said. "There were flights where you would take your long gown because we were always getting invited to the passengers' parties—and even a coronation" for the shah of Iran.

But not all the memories were crowned with caviar. On one refugee charter flight out of Vietnam, a passenger unsuccessfully tried to give her baby away to Ms. Ongay or other crew members in hopes of giving the child a more stable upbringing. There were long stretches away from home when the airline sent employees on short notice around the world. And there were many uncomfortable flights where flight attendants deflected the sexual advances of passengers. "The nights got longer and longer," Ms. Ongay said.

Ken McAdams, Pan Am's chief pilot for many years, flew the last U.S. commercial flight out of Tehran in 1979 when the shah fled into exile, and the first U.S. commercial airline flight into China after President Nixon reopened relations in 1972.

He was on duty during two terrorism hijacking attempts. In 1970, pilots raced to land and evacuate a jet minutes before bombs rigged with timers exploded in Cairo. Another time, terrorists armed with machine guns attacked a Pan Am flight in Pakistan before it departed. Mr. McAdams, in contact with the crew by high-frequency radio, told the crew to escape out cockpit windows so the plane couldn't get airborne.

"No one realizes all that Pan Am did for this country."

Al Topping, who was Pan Am's station manager in Saigon, facilitated orphan airlifts from Vietnam with 747s fitted with 300 cardboard boxes on seats for diaperless babies. He also promised the airline's 61 Vietnamese workers that they and their immediate family members would be airlifted to the U.S. if Saigon fell. The 61 people

turned in 700 names of "immediate" family members. On April 24, 1975, he put 463 people on a 747 that had 375 seats. People were put in bathrooms and galleys and on the floor for what would be the last U.S. flight out of Saigon.

Pan Am suffered a long, painful money drain and corporate death. It over-expanded with the Boeing 747, forcing it to discount prices just as oil prices skyrocketed with OPEC oil embargoes. It competed against subsidized foreign airlines and new low-cost start-ups and found itself ill-prepared for U.S. airline deregulation because it lacked a domestic network to feed passengers to its international flights. The 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, caused bookings to evaporate. In 1991, what little was left of the airline was liquidated at bankruptcy auction.

To Jackie Knackstedt, who started as a Pan Am stewardess on the Boeing 707 in 1973 and currently works as a Delta flight attendant, the end of Pan Am meant younger passengers and airline workers will never know what travel once was or could be.

Instead of five-day layovers in Fiji and three-day layovers in Sydney, most of her stops now amount to only nine hours before returning to duty, Ms. Knackstedt said. Instead of cooking and serving gourmet meals, she now sells snacks and sandwiches.

"The other day a passenger said to me, 'You don't look like you're enjoying this,' " Ms. Knackstedt said. "If I wanted to sell food, I'd work in a supermarket."