

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

For the Singapore Girl, It's Her Time to Shine

Airline Pact Builds on Well-Defined Image

By WAYNE ARNOLD

SINGAPORE, Dec. 30 — Seductively prim in her snug sarong and sandaled feet, she has been the epitome of airborne Asian hospitality for 27 years, an object of feminist ire and a primary reason her employer has vaulted to the forefront of the global aviation industry.

She is Singapore Girl. Hear her roar.

Last week, Singapore Airlines, which made a mascot of its attentive stewardess in 1972 and turned her into a marketing icon, said it would pay £600 million, or \$967 million, in cash for a 49 percent stake in Virgin Atlantic, the carrier owned by the Virgin Group of Britain.

Under the deal, if regulators approve, the two airlines will share passengers, joining two companies known for pampering customers. It is a direct challenge to Virgin's arch-rival, British Airways, giving each partner the ability to fly passengers, if they so choose, from California around the world to New York, with stopovers across Eurasia and Australia.

For Singapore Airlines, the investment represents the end of a long search to expand its route network, which included failed attempts to buy into four other carriers.

How a flag carrier with no domestic routes and a home market of slightly more than three million people has managed to grow so large and have so much money, analysts say, can be partly attributed to a management that has never reported a loss and carries no debt.

But equally important has been the airline's ability to parlay its image into an award-winning global reputation for service and safety that travelers are willing to pay a premium to enjoy. "The Singapore Girl thing is not strictly P.C. these days," said Wendy Wong, an analyst at Merrill Lynch in Hong Kong. "It's just very successful."

Singapore Airlines was born in 1972, when it split from Malaysia-Singapore Airlines. Faced with more established rivals with more modern fleets, the airline focused on service. Its first advertisement pictured a stewardess next to the tag line, "This girl's in love with you."

In 1974, the air hostesses traded skirts and blouses for the equivalent of a Malay evening gown, a blue sarong kebaya, each tailored to fit so closely they have been known to split open during flights. The airline adopted a new slogan: "Singapore

Girl, you're a great way to fly."

Since then, the outfit and slogan have changed little. These days, the Singapore Girl appears not just in the cabin, but mincing in the countryside on TV, complete with her own theme song.

"It takes a lot of guts to stick with a strategy of promoting service when other airlines are moving to something more functional," said Theodore Cho, deputy managing director at Monsoon Advertising here.

The Singapore Girl was the brainchild of Ian Batey, a Briton who moved to Sydney, Australia, in 1948 and then to Singapore in 1969 and who runs Batey Ads Ltd., Singapore's largest ad agency. The agency, which sold a 37 percent stake to WPP Group last year, has handled the airline's account since 1972. The airline spends more than 80 million Singapore dollars, or \$48 million, a year on advertising.

Mr. Batey was not available for comment, and the agency executive in charge of the Singapore Airlines account declined to comment.

Critics accuse the airline of using sex to sell seats, not that that would be a first for an airline or for an Asian business. The difference at Singapore Airlines is that what passengers see in the ads, they more or less get when they board a plane. "We've never done an ad which didn't have a genuine Singapore Girl in it," said Rick Scott-Blackwell, chairman and co-founder of Batey Ads.

Prospective stewardesses — the airline has yet to adopt the sex-neutral term flight attendant — must be younger than 26, at least 5 feet 2 inches tall, slim and attractive with a good complexion. And Asian.

While about half the airline's flight attendants are men, they are less visible than their female colleagues. They perform more of the galley functions, while the women by and large serve the meals and beverages. The stewards, who wear jackets and ties, must be Singaporean or Malaysian and in their 20's.

Applicants are reviewed in a series of four interviews that, according to a former Singapore Girl, includes a swim test in which the women are inspected for scars and blemishes their sarongs would not hide.

The chosen undergo four months of training that features mock crashes, fire-fighting and life-saving. But it is also a debutante boot camp. Trainees are taught poise, deportment and wine selection. They learn how to address surly passengers with a smile; how to cut their hair to match the shape of their faces; what make-



The Singapore Airlines alliance with Virgin Atlantic is in some sense a triumph for the Singapore Girl stewardess, the image long burnished by the Asian carrier. Above, a Singapore Airlines ad from earlier this year.

up best matches their skin tones; how to sit, walk and climb stairs.

The airline is unabashed. "We want to present a complete picture of femininity," said Maniam Supramaniam, a spokesman for the airline. And passengers remain loyal despite what appears to go against conventional notions of women's liberation. "Why change a winning formula?" Mr. Supramaniam asked.

Mr. Cho said the Singapore Girl presented a less suggestive image in Asia. Accustomed to self-effacing service and inured to flesh by years of Hollywood imagery, Asians see just what the airline says it intended: graciousness.

Khoo Heng Keow, president of the Singapore Association of Women for Action and Research, said that the form-fitting sarong was merely elegant. But, she added, advertising the flight attendant as a "great way to fly" is sexist. "It robs her of her personhood and makes her a vehicle," she said.

The Singapore Girl is not Singapore Airlines' only draw. In addition to the carrier's legendary punctuality, passengers rave about its in-flight entertainment: each seat is equipped with a television screen and the ability to play 10 video

games or watch one of 21 channels, including eight offering films.

Analysts also credit the company's policy of quickly replacing older aircraft with new ones so that it can get relatively high prices for its used planes and keep its fleet among the youngest in the industry.

Even as Asia's recent financial crisis kept many passengers at home, Singapore Airlines managed to post a profit. And it is sitting on roughly 3 billion Singapore dollars, or \$1.8 billion, in cash.

The carrier's profitability is partly attributable to a highly regulated Asian airline industry that keeps competitive pressures low. But the company has also cut costs in the face of threats on its long-haul routes and rising wages at home.

The main question now is whether a carrier represented by Singapore Girl is compatible over the long term with its cheeky London partner. When he announced the deal with Virgin Atlantic in London, Cheong Choong Kong, the chief executive of Singapore Airlines, said he hoped Singaporeans would be infected by the joie de vivre shown by Richard Branson, the Virgin Group chairman, and "begin taking ourselves a little less seriously."