



the ultimate A-Z destination guide



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COME FLY WITH ME



Inside the Emirates Aviation Experience, London. Image: Emirates Aviation Experience

Jo Fletcher-Cross fulfils her dream of piloting a passenger jet — without ever leaving the ground

“Just bring it in a little. A little to the right. Er... a little more or you’ll land on the water.” My instructor is remarkably calm, given that I’m about to fly a Boeing B-777 into the South China Sea. I try not to panic, tilting the aircraft slightly and bringing the nose level while my co-pilot brings the landing gear down. We hold our breath as the aircraft comes into land at Hong Kong’s Kai Tak airport.

It’s a remarkably smooth touchdown, just a slight bounce up and down before we screech right off the end of the runway, over a fence, through some trees and finally come to a halt in front of a large building.

“Nice of you to drop your passengers directly at the airport hotel,” says my instructor.

Given that my flying experience to date is a grand total of zero hours, I feel rather proud of my rather unorthodox landing. I’d probably feel a bit less proud if it was a real plane, but as I’m actually in a building right underneath the Emirates Air Line cable car station at Greenwich Peninsula in London, I think I’m justified in my mild smugness. At least we didn’t end up in the sea.

I’m sitting in a B-777 simulator at the Emirates Aviation Experience. Ever since I was very, very small I’ve loved planes, and for almost as long as I can remember I’ve wanted to try my hand at an aircraft simulator. This is possibly because I grew up watching *The Krypton Factor* which made the flight simulator round look like the most fun thing ever.

So here I am, having an actual dream come true, and if anything, it’s genuinely better than I imagined. Prospective pilots at the Aviation Experience can choose between the Airbus A380 or the B-777, which I’ve plumped for because of its rather more retro controls. I’d rather be a passenger on an A380, but flying it looks more like playing a video game than an old-school pilot experience.

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The choices don't end there: the next step is to decide whether you want to fly in the morning, afternoon or evening, then choose your weather conditions. Finally — best of all — which airport to take off from or land at.

On my first go I take off in near-perfect weather from Heathrow, which gives me the chance to get to grips with the controls and then cruise over the Thames, spotting my favourite landmarks. It all gets a bit meta when we fly over the Emirates Air Line.

Having not screwed that up completely, I then embrace my practically-a-real-pilot-now status and decide to land at Kai Tak, the airport that was legendary for its terrifying descents through the skyscrapers of Hong Kong onto a landing strip that jutted out into the sea. It closed in 1998, so even if I were to somehow rack up the flying hours to get my licence, I'll never be able to land there — this is my only chance. Just to make things more interesting, I select a stormy evening as the setting and give it a go.

No, I don't quite make it onto the runway. Yes, I probably cause tens of thousands of pounds of hypothetical damage to my imaginary plane. But it's so much fun.

A simulator session is 30-minutes long and costs £60. It can be shared by up to four people, with a minimum age of nine years.

aviation-experience.com

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