

# Turning the mirror on industry leaders whose companies were voted the best of 2015 by our readers

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- You may be surprised, amused, even amazed at the diverse backgrounds of this year's visionary travel professionals.

Personal stories are always intriguing, so this year Premier Traveler Features Editor Janet Forman asked this select group to turn back the clock and tell us "What did you want to be when you grew up?"



## The lure of a startup

Kim Soo Cheon, President & CEO

Asiana Airlines: Best Transpacific Business-Class Service, Best Economy-Class Service in the World, Best Flight Attendants in the World, Best In-Flight Services in the World, Best Overall Airline in the World

I joined Asiana Airlines as a founding member when the company was established in 1988. Working in the airline industry seemed attractive, but working in a startup where you could make something out of nothing attracted me as well.

In another life: I like reading and reflecting on it, and I am interested in humanities, especially in history. I probably would have been a scholar in Korean or Asian history if I had not been with Asiana. However, I am now satisfied with my work and I will continue to do my best so that Asiana can make its mark in the history of the airline industry in the future.

## Flight Attendant Extraordinaire

Stephen Knowles, Managing Director, Inflight Service

Air Canada: Best North American Airline for Business-Class Service, Best Airline Website, Best North American Airline for International Travel, Best Flight Attendants in North America (4th Consecutive Year)

I had always wanted to join the airlines and did so as a flight attendant, flying full time for 15 years before entering management. My career fulfilled a wonderful dream of being part of a service industry that has allure, excitement, and daily interactions with customers, all of whom have a story. As Air Canada's Managing Director of In-Flight Service, I am proud to lead and work alongside almost 6,800 professional and caring flight attendants whom I sincerely admire, and will champion their efforts at every opportunity.

With heartfelt thanks

Tewolde Gebremariam, CEO

Ethiopian Airlines: Best Airline to Africa (2nd Consecutive Year), Best Airline in Africa

First and foremost I would like to thank the management and staff of Premier Traveler magazine for the recognition and the award. We also thank our valued customers for the strong vote of confidence in our global award-winning ground and on-board services. The credit goes to the more than 9,000 strong men and women of the Ethiopian Airlines family working from all corners of the world, day and night, to keep our beloved airline shining high in the skies. I am very proud of our team. This award will energize all of us at Ethiopian to do more in our customer services, as there is always room for improvement.

Customer Centric

Martin Drew, Senior Vice President Americas

Etihad Airways: Best Airline in the Middle East (4th Consecutive Year), Best Airline to India

Most of my family is involved with the airline and travel industry; so from an early age, I knew this would be the path for me.

In another life: If I hadn't opted for a career in aviation, I would have likely gone into property development, as I also have a passion for taking tired properties and restoring them.

Obsessed with the Airport

Hideki Takarada, Vice President Passenger Marketing - The Americas

Japan Airlines: Best Airline to Asia, Best Premium Economy-Class Service in the World

When I was young, I was thrilled every time I had a chance to go to the airport.

In another life: I also wanted to be a chef. I love cooking, and I still believe I may do this someday.

Born in the Clouds

Steven Haro, Director, 777 / 777X Marketing

The Boeing Company Boeing 777: Best Aircraft Type (4th Consecutive Year)

I was fortunate enough to be exposed to the world beyond my hometown in Northern California as a young adult, through the U.S. Navy.

In another life: One day in the future I'd like to start a company whose purpose will be to enable people to not just dream big about travel but to manage it all the way through to basking in the afterglow of the perfect adventure.

The "Career Boarding Pass"

Michael Blunt, Vice-President Corporate Communications

oneworld Alliance: Best Airline Alliance (3rd Consecutive Year)

Travelling is in the family genes, going back generations and generations: I was born and raised in South and Southeast Asia, and have not stood still much since.

In another life: My first proper job was as a newspaper reporter. If I had not wound up as an airline communications guy, then I likely would have stuck to journalism. Who knows, I could have ended in my other dream job—as Features Editor with Premier Traveler!

#### Planning Travel at Age 12

Joel Chusid, Executive Director, USA

Hainan Airlines: Best Airline in China (4th Consecutive Year)

I was always intrigued by airplanes and was the first in my family to fly on one, when I was around 12: I planned the whole trip myself, from Newark to Washington, D.C., for a weekend with my aunt.

#### Road Warrior From Birth

Trip Barrett, Vice President, Brand Management, Latin America

Starwood Latin America: Best Hotel Chain in Latin America (4th Consecutive Year)

I guess I've always been in the travel business, but it's only since joining Starwood in 2003 that I've actually worked directly in the industry!

In another life: When I graduated from The Wharton Business School, I reluctantly declined an offer to join American Airlines at their corporate headquarters in Dallas, instead heading to New York to be part of an investment-banking firm. Fortunately, in my role with Starwood, I have the opportunity to travel extensively; so can still keep up with the airline industry as an avid frequent flyer.

#### 48 Years in Travel

Ted Brady, Sales Manager Southwest Region USA

Emirates: Best First-Class Service in the World (2nd Consecutive Year) Best Airline in the World for International Travel

Airlines and the travel business have been in my blood all my life. I started my airline career as a part time agent with Eastern Airlines in Chattanooga, Tennessee, back in 1967. I had just returned from Vietnam, was back in college, and my father was chief of the FAA in Chattanooga. He suggested that we visit Eastern Airlines and United Airlines for part time job opportunities. Eastern hired me on the spot, and I spent 20 years with those guys. After ten years with Continental, President of Prestige Travel Group, and 12-plus years with Emirates, I'm now on my 48th year in the travel business.

#### The Heritage of Shannon

Ian Bradley, Director Communications EMEA & Pacific

American Airlines: Best North American Airline for First-Class Service (3rd Consecutive Year), Best Airline to South America, Best Transcontinental Service (2nd Consecutive Year)

Travel always appealed to me, and aviation in particular was the industry in which I was determined to work. Growing up near Shannon Airport in Ireland I was aware of its heritage as a stopping point for transatlantic travel, and watching the 747s made me want to work in aviation as soon as I could.

#### A Science Experiment

Juan Carlos Liscano, Managing Director at LAX

American Airlines: Best North American Airline for First-Class Service (3rd Consecutive Year), Best Airline to South America, Best Transcontinental Service (2nd Consecutive Year)

I landed in travel by chance. I originally went to school for biotechnology at Rochester Institute of Technology, where I did leukemia research and was part of two articles published in the Blood journal. But lab work was not very exciting for me, so I switched to business.

In another life: I would have been a professor. I love educating, imparting knowledge and getting the best out of people!

With His Last \$600

Scott Solombrino, President and CEO

Dav El Chauffeured Transportation: Best Luxury Car Service Worldwide

When I was a freshman in college I ran out of tuition money, but with my last \$600 I bought an old 1969 Caddy limo. By the time I graduated I had a company doing \$3 million a year.

In another life: If I had chosen a different career I would have been a lawyer and a politician. Still, I have no regrets. I love my career, and would do it all again!

Written on the Chalkboard

Jim Compton, Vice Chairman and Chief Revenue Officer

United Airlines: Best Domestic Frequent-Flyer Program (3rd Consecutive Year), Best B787 Layout, Best Airline Credit Card Rewards Program in the World (2nd Consecutive Year)

I was in a graduate economics class working on my Master's at the University of Illinois Chicago, when the professor wrote on the board that United was looking for someone with forecasting background.

In another life: I probably would have chosen a career in urban planning.

Dreams of Showbiz

The Classical Pianist

Ginger Evans, Chicago Aviation Commissioner

Chicago O'Hare International Airport: Best Airport in North America

I went into aviation as an engineer, designing airfield runways and aprons. I spent a lot of time driving around the airfield with operations and maintenance personnel, who taught me the importance of efficient facilities for aircraft movement and support.

In another life: Before I studied engineering I was a serious student of piano. I taught and performed for many years, but realized I didn't have "the right stuff" to make it a career. But the piano still gives me tremendous enjoyment and beauty.

He's the one calling "Action" now

David Cush, President and CEO

Virgin America: Best In-Flight Services in North America (4th Consecutive Year)

I had a lot of friends from graduate school that went on to work for American Airlines, and they always spoke about all the great learning experiences and benefits that come with working for an airline.

In another life: I was initially on my way towards a career in broadcasting, and majored in film at Southern Methodist University. I decided fairly early on that business was really my strength, which ultimately led me to a career in the aviation industry. It is without doubt one of the most exciting and dynamic industries in the world, so it's hard to imagine working outside of it now.

The Aspiring Actor

Uri Steinberg, Israel Tourism Commissioner for North America

Tourism Israel: Best Destination in the World

I didn't really decide to be in the travel business. I began my work with Israel in the form of branding and marketing the destination abroad, which led me to the travel industry.

In another life: I would have been an actor. All I need is the looks and talent, and then I'd be good!

High Kicks

Stephanie Goldman, Senior Director, Marketing and Communications

Hartmann Luggage: World's Best Luggage

My dream was to work in marketing for a global company that was best in class in its category.

In another life: I would have been a Rockette! If only I was a few inches taller...

Their Hearts Were in the Skies

Blame it on the F14 Tomcat

Larry Schneider, 777 Chief Project Engineer and Vice President

The Boeing Company Boeing 777: Best Aircraft Type (4th Consecutive Year)

As a young boy growing up on Long Island, I was surrounded by Grumman employees and loved the F14 Tomcat. I decided I wanted to be an aerospace engineer and went to school at Georgia Tech.

In another life: I always loved to cook, and thought I would consider culinary school if my aerospace career didn't work out. Happily that never happened!

In Love with Aviation

Roberto Cuesta, Jr., President airberlin Americas, Inc.

Airberlin: Best International Frequent-Flyer Program

I began working in the travel business as an undergraduate in college, and continued to do so while pursuing my MBA.

In another life: Growing up the son of a doctor, I've always had an interest in the profession, and for some time thought that might be a possibility. But in the end, my heart beats for the aviation industry, and of course, airberlin.

Motivated by The Good Life

Hooked in College

Ben Trodd, Regional Vice President and General Manager

Beverly Wilshire, Beverley Hills (A Four Seasons Hotel): Best Hotel Chain in the World

Throughout my time at college I worked in London hotels, bars and restaurants, and was hooked.

In another life: I am from an entire family of schoolteachers, so it may be that the hospitality industry saved me from unleashing my influence on the nation's kids!

The Happy Accidents

It Started with Duty Free...

Robin Hayes, CEO

JetBlue: Best Domestic Airline

I got into the airline business more by accident. I got into the airline business more by accident. In university, I studied electrical engineering, and after I finished, I took a summer job in Boston selling duty free in the airport, in the same terminal that would one day become home to JetBlue, which was still at least a decade away from being born. I supported all the airlines in the terminal - TWA, Delta, British Airways - but the British Airways people were always the nicest to me, so I decided to work at BA. My first position was in Glasgow, Scotland, checking people in and boarding flights... and that's how I got started.

From the ocean to the sky

Gary Kelly, CEO and Chairman

Southwest Airlines: Best Low-Cost Carrier in North America (3rd Consecutive Year)

In high school I wanted to be an oceanographer. I loved the ocean and science. I was recruited to the University of El Paso (UTEP) to play football, and as you can imagine, when I went to enroll and declare my major, they didn't offer oceanography in the West Texas desert! So, I followed in my father's footsteps, selecting accounting, which eventually led me to Southwest Airlines. It's funny to think back on that now, as my journey took me from the ocean to the sky. But I wouldn't have it any other way!

Jonathan Frolich, Vice President

Hyatt: Best Hotel Chain in China

Andaz: Best Lifestyle Hotel Brand (4th Consecutive Year)

Firstly, I'd like to thank the Premier Traveler readers for helping Andaz to earn the Best Lifestyle Hotel brand award for four years in a row. We are delighted and honored. Our brand is all about connecting and inspiring people and bringing the very best of each destination into the walls of each of our hotels. We are thrilled to be recognized for the work that we do to position Andaz as a leader in the lifestyle category and look forward to continuing our work in making this brand the very best it can be for our guests.

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