



Ⓜ THE VIEW FROM: Mark Vanhoenacker

Dreams take flight *London*

The pilot and author on how he fulfilled his childhood ambitions and why he is fascinated by cities as well as the view from the sky.

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For Mark Vanhoenacker, it all began in his childhood bedroom: as he stared at the paper globe perched on his desk, next to a model aircraft, dreaming of cities and places far from his hometown in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. “I was very drawn to the names of cities. When you’re spinning a globe, a name is almost all the information you have,” he says.

Now a veteran British Airways long-haul pilot, he has recently written a travelogue-cum-urbanism memoir called *Imagine a City* – a follow-up to his hugely popular *Skyfaring: A Journey with a Pilot* – reflecting on his relationships with metropolises across the globe and how they have changed over the course of his nearly 20-year aviation career. But, he explains, there was turbulence on arriving at this point.

Growing up gay, in a small town, meant that the hustle and bustle and freedom of big urban settlements was just the stuff of dreams. “Like a lot of kids in that situation, I looked at cities as a way of going into another place and

imagining my own future – a future that might be more comfortable than how I felt at the time,” he tells MONOCLE.

As he moved through his adolescent years, Vanhoenacker’s fascination with names on the globe turned into a curiosity over airline route maps. “You would see these two names that were only connected by this curving, perfect line. I knew that all of those places were impossibly complicated and intricate, with rich histories, and yet they were connected in this deceptively simple way by aeroplanes.”

Today, Vanhoenacker recognises cities by silhouettes, co-ordinates, or the particular way the streetlights shine at night from above. And while it’s not uncommon for passengers to stare out of the window and wonder what lies below – especially when crossing a part of the world for the very first time – Vanhoenacker confirms that the view really is better from the flight deck. “With those fast forward windows, it really is an extraordinary sight. As we’re descending you can see how cities are steered by geography, by the rivers or mountains around them, how they lie by the harbour or the way a railway line crosses its entirety.”

This, Vanhoenacker explains, is one thing that anyone – pilot, urbanism enthusiast or otherwise – can learn about observing cities from the sky: how the grid, when viewed from above, can tell us about our likely experiences on the ground, leading to an unexpected appreciation of a place. For proof, he points to his own relationship with Salt Lake City. “I saw it first from the air, which drew me to spend time there. It’s in an extremely striking location, ringed by mountains in the east, which gives way to a desert. So when I visited as a traveller, I was much more excited about going there, because I already had the sense of the city from seeing the grid above.”

When MONOCLE meets Vanhoenacker, he’s just about to take his routine pilot exams, where every six months he has to go into a flight simulator to practise all kinds of scenarios (even the most unlikely ones). His favourite aircraft is the now-retired Boeing 747 – the same as the model aircraft he had as a child.

And as for his favourite view when he makes the approach into a city? “I really love flying into Los Angeles, especially in the last hour and a half of the flight. You get the sense of these vast deserts transforming into a ring of mountains, which are often snowcapped, and then beyond them you have this bowl of light lying on the edge of the Pacific. It’s an extremely dramatic approach. And I really recommend that you get a seat by the window on the right side of the aircraft.” — Ⓜ

The CV

1974: Born in Pittsfield, Massachusetts

1996: Graduates in history from Amherst College, magna cum laude

2001: Begins pilot training in Oxford

2003: Pilots his first commercial flight with British Airways

2007: Pilots first long-haul flight from London to Hong Kong

2015: Publishes first book, *Skyfaring: A Journey with a Pilot*

2018: Begins piloting Boeing 787 aircraft

2022: *Imagine a City: A Pilot Sees the World* is published