The real Travelzoo

It's not just humans who are transported from A to B on planes. Patrick Whyte goes on an exclusive tour of Lufthansa's live animal facility at Frankfurt airport to see how it cares for animal passengers.

It's the smell that hits you first. Then comes the barking. Lufthansa's Animal Lounge at Frankfurt airport is not for the fainthearted.

Since it was built in 2008, special four-legged passengers have included rhinos, hippos and bears but sadly on my visit the exotic animals are in short supply. We missed a lioness by a few hours.

The vast majority of the centre's visitors are more common types of animal. In 2012 it looked after 80 million ornamental fish, 15,000 dogs and cats and 2,000 horses.

Director Axel Heitmann says current residents are on the low side, because it's approaching the weekend. We head through a pull-up door into a narrow concrete-floored room. The cacophony of noise is immense and the strong aroma of disinfectant takes some getting used to.

We are led through a series of rooms, all of which are designed to hold different animals. On our way we pass a fully enclosed container that is vibrating alarmingly. Inside are three horses bound for Pakistan. The space seems barely suitable for one let alone three but even this is in the animal's best interest. Heitmann says that too much space could lead to the horse falling over on the flight, causing serious injury. Better to keep them cramped yet stable.

Further along we pass the cause of most of the noise and activity: dogs of various types and ages. One of the most important features of the centre is that it can be readily subdivided.

Walking into another room we are greeted by boxes with the wording “live fish” on the outside. Inside are bags and bags of coral, which will need to be checked to ensure that it was not obtained illegally.

To cope with the demand there are 25 animal keepers and cargo handlers, 30 cargo coordinators and 25 veterinary physicians who are on hand 24 hours a day to make sure their guests are well looked after. And this extends to even their smallest visitors.

Towards the end of our tour one of the garage-style door slides up and a lorry appears. Staff start unloading crate after crate and it is initially difficult to tell what is onboard. Soon however, we can see tufts of tiny yellow feathers peaking through the cardboard and the sound of hundreds of tweeting chicks gradually fills the room.

Animal Lounge in numbers

Lufthansa's Animal Lounge welcomes around 110 million passengers each year, including:

- 2,000 horses
- 14,000 dogs and cats
- 80 million ornamental fish
- 300 tons of angleworms
- 8,000 pigs
- 150 zoo animals