

Fog saved five from fatal flight

Argus Correspondents

FIVE would-be passengers of the ill-fated South African Airways flight SA 295 cheated death when their flight to Taipei from Hong Kong was re-routed to Taiwan's second largest city, Kaohsiung, because of fog above Taipei.

They returned to Hong Kong to catch another South African Airways flight, SA 287 which arrived at Jan Smuts Airport shortly after 7am yesterday.

Connecting flight

The plane stopped in Mauritius but only picked up a "handful" passengers, most of whom came from a connecting flight from Singapore, passengers said.

The Johannesburg Bureau chief of CBS News, Mr Bill Mutschmann and his wife Doreen were two of the five who were meant to board flight SA 295.

"My wife and I were on our way out from mainland China after a months' holiday and were planning to spend a week in Mauritius on the return trip.

"We caught a connecting flight from Hong Kong to Taipei but dense fog prevented our plane from landing and were diverted to another airport in Taiwan.

Complaining

"We spent the night there, complaining bitterly that we had missed our flight — flight SA 295. We then flew back to Hong Kong and caught another flight to Johannesburg via Mauritius. When we got to Mauritius they wouldn't let us off the plane so we flew home.

"I would much rather miss a week in Mauritius than have been on SA 295," Mr Mutschmann said.

"I fly myself, I'm a pilot. There are five extremely lucky people sitting in Johannesburg who should have been dead," said Mr Mutschmann.

Mr Mutschmann said family and friends from all over the world had been telephoning his home to find out whether or not they were on SA 295. "They knew we were meant to catch that flight. The phone hasn't stopped ringing," Mr Mutschmann said.

Johannesburg businessman Mr Michael Murray telephoned his wife, Barbara, in Johannesburg at 1145pm, local time, to tell her he wouldn't be on SA 295.

On Saturday morning Mr Murray's father phoned Mrs Murray to tell her about the accident.

She nevertheless shed a few tears while waiting in anticipation for the passengers to enter the international arrivals hall.

Crew replaced

Mr Peter Gutridge said fellow passenger Mr Bill Mutschmann told him of the accident when they returned to Hong Kong.

Mr Gutridge then telephoned his wife, Elsje, in Johannesburg.

Flight co-ordinator, Mrs Alex Economides, flew out on the Helderberg on Thursday night which was en route to Taipei via Mauritius.

In Mauritius the crew was replaced. Mrs Economides caught a later flight to Taipei then transferred to Hong Kong.

Depressed

Her husband, Johannesburg photographer Mr Coetzee Economides, said he had spoken to his wife on Saturday morning and she was very depressed about the accident.

"She knew quite a few of those who were killed," Mr Economides said.

Mrs Economides has been with SAA for 15 years.

"This is very distressing stuff," her husband said.

There were also tears at the airport yesterday when SAA stewardesses met their colleagues to exchange news of the accident.