



Leather flies high as air travellers lap up luxury

At the top end of the travel market, life is competitive. Long-haul flights tend to be the most lucrative, making routes between Asia and Europe or North America highly prized by carriers, even as overall passenger numbers in all regions have suffered owing to the tentative global economic situation.

The battle for business is intense and has come under extra pressure from low-cost airlines. But while these companies have revolutionised short-haul travel, bringing new life to underused regional airports and tearing up the rule books on the services air passengers should expect to receive, on ways to make extra revenue and on turnaround-times at terminals, none seems to have found a way of making low-cost work on long-haul routes.

Commentators have suggested that companies such as the recently collapsed Oasis Hong Kong Airlines tried to be a low-cost airline offering long-haul flights but failed to work out the best cost model. Others, such as Maxjet, which went the opposite way and offered an all-business class service on transatlantic routes, have also failed. According to Chris Avery, an aviation analyst at JP Morgan, start-up airlines like these have struggled to adapt and to get their service offering mix right as fuel prices go up. "When the tide goes

out, you find the business models that were never really sustainable," he told the *Financial Times* recently.

More experienced carriers have adapted better and perhaps the best recent example is Singapore Airlines. It has used the milestone delivery of the first commercial Airbus A380 aircraft to revolutionise its first-class offering—with leather featuring prominently—but it has also worked out how best to secure a healthy return on its investment with the aerospace manufacturer.

The Asian airline is the first to put the new aircraft into commercial service; Airbus has delivered three A380s to Singapore Airlines already, with a further 19 on order. The first of the new aeroplanes went into service on October 28 and has been ferrying passengers between Singapore and Sydney since then. In March, the A380 came into service on the Singapore-London route and services linking the tiny country on the tip of Malaysia to Tokyo start on May 20.

Flying time to Sydney is seven hours and it takes about the same time to go from Singapore to the Japanese capital on a non-stop flight. However, it's on the London route—a trip of 13 hours each way—that first-class passengers will feel the biggest benefit of what the airline has done with the A380.

Singapore Airlines took delivery of the first Airbus A380 destined for commercial use in October 2007.

CREDIT: EXM COMPANY / H. GOUSSE

No expense spared

The front of the bottom deck of the aircraft is devoted to 12 "Singapore Airline Suites", offering sumptuous and private accommodation to passengers who are prepared to pay as much as \$15,000 each for the privilege for the round trip. The seat offers more than ample room and is upholstered in soft, mustard-coloured bovine leather, which combines with the wood-panelling on the table surfaces to give a classy, but warm atmosphere. The seat seems especially generous at the sides, with the expanse of leather spreading beyond the arm-rests.

Each suite is a private compartment with screens and a sliding door allowing luxury-end passengers to have their own personal cabin on board. There is a fold-up bed between the seat and a flat-screen television set in the wall. There is another first here: two first-class passengers in adjoining suites can remove the screens between them and have their sleeping accommodation combined to form the first double-bed in the skies.

At the time of taking delivery of the new



aircraft and of showcasing the configuration his airline had chosen, the chief executive of Singapore Airlines, Chew Choon Seng, said the new suites would “redefine luxury air travel”, and he referred to them as “a class beyond first”. He said the combination of the new aircraft and the cabin Singapore Airlines had decided on would offer passengers “a new way of flying”.

Interiors count, then, and leather is important in aircraft interiors, especially if you want wealthy customers to offer you their business and show you some loyalty. A year ago, singer Britney Spears refused to fly on a United Airlines flight from Florida to Los Angeles after discovering on boarding the plane that the seats were made from synthetic material. She insisted on getting off and delayed the flight's departure by an hour. A fellow passenger quoted her as saying: “I don't want to fly on this plane. It hasn't got leather seats.”

No news of Ms Spears trying out the new Singapore Airline Suites has reached us yet, but we feel sure she would give them her seal of approval.

Glasgow-based tanner Andrew Muirhead & Son, part of the Scottish Leather Group, has a distinguished track-record in supplying leather for airline interiors and confirms that it worked with Airbus on the A380, although it says

confidentiality agreements prevent it from releasing any details of the specific products and processes involved.

What we can say is that the company is

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CREDIT-AIRBUS/SINGAPORE AIRLINES

AIRBUS A380 ORDERS AND COMMITMENTS

ORDERS

Air France	12
China Southern	5
Emirates	58
Etiihad	4
ILFC	10
Kingdom Holding Company	1
Kingfisher Airlines	5
Korean Air	5
Lufthansa	15
Malaysia Airlines	6
Qantas Airways	20
Qatar Airways	5
Singapore Airlines	19
Thai Airways	6
Virgin Atlantic	6
Total	177

COMMITMENTS

British Airways	12
Grupo Marsans	4
Total	16

Data correct at November 2007.

constantly thinking of ways to improve its offering to the airline industry. All applications have their specific requirements, but the aviation industry has to be especially stringent on issues such as flammability. As well as meeting airlines' needs, the Scottish company has achieved recognition from safety standards bodies for the facilities it has put in place for fire-testing and is making this available to the suppliers of other elements of aircraft interiors for them to test their products.

With fuel prices and, consequently, weight concerns so prominent in customers' minds, there is also pressure on tanners to keep the weight of the finished leather they supply as low as possible. This is tricky, especially as it can take a whole bovine hide to cover one business class seat.

These important pragmatic aspects must take nothing away from the beauty, look and feel of the finished leather though. Andrew Muirhead & Son believes it has achieved this balance consistently and, possibly, more effectively than ever in a new range of leathers for aircraft interiors called Arisaig, after a village in the western Highlands of Scotland. The leathers in the range have turned lots of heads at events



such as Aircraft Interiors Expo in Hamburg in April.

Available in 21 colours, the Arisaig range complies with all the performance criteria the airline industry demands, but still has the look and feel of full-grain leather and is specifically designed with the interiors of the latest generation of first- and business-class cabin interiors in mind.

Best mix

But not everyone can afford to travel in first or business, which brings us back to the question of airlines having to get the seating mix right, so as not to allow all the leather and luxury mentioned above to put them out of business in such a competitive market-place.

Putting the first A380s into commercial service with the Singapore Airline Suites on board has probably won more positive publicity for that airline than any innovation it has launched before, so apart from the comfort and beauty, they have been a brilliant piece of marketing. There are three levels of service on board, with 60 business-class passengers occupying a part of the upper deck of the new aircraft with—Singapore Airlines insists—the widest seat in this class, upholstered in high-quality leather, of course, but this time with some in a darker shade.

So that's 12 in first, 60 in economy and no fewer than 399 people sitting in economy seats, some behind business-class



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CREDIT: AIRBUS/SINGAPORE AIRLINES

customers upstairs, but most in rows of ten seats behind the suites. It's the biggest passenger aircraft in the skies and Airbus is proud of its efficiency. The manufacturer says its "seat-kilometre" performance is 20% lower than previous large-scale passenger aircraft. To achieve this, it's clear that the number of suites has to be limited, with the majority of passengers enjoying the beauty of the leather inside from afar. 🌐

The business-class cabin in one of the Singapore Airlines Airbus A380 aircraft shows darker leather in the upholstery. The aeroplane can accommodate 471 passengers: 12 in the new Singapore Airlines Suites, 60 in business class and 399 in economy. Getting the mix right is an important element of making a route profitable.

CREDIT: AIRBUS/SINGAPORE AIRLINES

