



German flag carrier Lufthansa says leather upholstery in its cabins can last 30 years, compared to four for textile upholstery.

IMAGE CREDIT: AIRBUS



Spending spree

Tanners producing leather for aircraft upholstery have a series of stringent standards to meet and demanding customers to satisfy, but a key moment in the aircraft industry's economic cycle could be approaching and, with the emphasis on making aeroplanes as sustainable as possible, longer-lasting leather seats may be about to enjoy a new surge in popularity.

A need for greater sustainability and energy efficiency is driving a flood of orders for new aircraft, comments at the 2011 Paris Air Show suggested. This should augur well for the leather industry; German national airline Lufthansa has said that leather upholstery on the airline's seats can last more than seven times longer than upholstery made from synthetic materials.

Some months ago, a member of the Lufthansa management team told the vice-president for development and application at the Lanxess leather business unit, Dr Dietrich Tegtmeier, that the airline was

having to re-do synthetic upholstery on aircraft seats after about four years, while it is able to keep using seats with leather upholstery for up to 30 years. "Tanners and their suppliers, including chemicals manufacturers, should work hard to make leather as long-lasting as possible," Dr Tegtmeier said on relaying the Lufthansa conversation. "And all of us should emphasise this as one of the qualities that makes leather such a sustainable material." He also said the leather industry should keep working on making lighter-weight options for aircraft upholstery as weight is a crucial issue for aerospace manufacturers.

Sustainability is another important driver in the aerospace industry. It's a sector that has drawn ongoing criticism for its environmental performance.

Aircraft manufacturer Airbus said at the Paris Air Show in late June that a move to revamp its A320 with new engines is proving popular with airlines and aircraft leasing companies. The A320 Neo will burn 25% less fuel than some competitor aircraft in the 100–200 passenger seat range, the most widely used in the commercial air industry. Airbus says it has already received 488 orders for the A320 Neo, from airlines including Qatar



Leather adds style, whether used on seats or panels. Airbus had the largest aircraft cabin on display at Asian Aerospace 2011, showcasing an A318 Elite corporate jet which seats up to 19 passengers in unequalled comfort, space and style.

IMAGE CREDIT: AIRBUS

Airways and SAS. Industry experts are predicting that new efficiency drives and the age of some existing fleets could lead to orders of new jets from Airbus, Boeing, Embraer, Bombardier, Comac, Irkut and other manufacturers of close to 25,000 over the next two decades.

Sustainable option

In the spirit of using fewer resources and making aeroplanes more durable, the attraction of leather upholstery should grow. It's more expensive than synthetic substitutes, but if it lasts more than seven times longer, it must be the more sustainable option. As airlines attempt to portray themselves in a greener light, the leather industry can help them.

The traditional reasons for using leather upholstery remain. It gives a more luxurious look and feel to the cabin, it's easier to clean (very important as airlines attempt to turn aircraft around quickly at airports to maximise their use) and passengers like it. Pop star Britney Spears made headlines a few years ago when she held up a commercial flight from Los Angeles to Florida by arriving after all other passengers



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were on board, and then demanding to be allowed to disembark and have her luggage unloaded when she discovered the plane didn't have leather seats.

High class

In its press releases, Airbus has a habit of referring to cabins with leather upholstery as "high class". At the start of 2011, Boeing's marketing vice-president for commercial aircraft in the US, Randy Tinseth, said the interior in his company's 777-300ER aeroplane, as commissioned by Air New Zealand, put him into "sensory overload". He said that the leather upholstery in premium economy seats would make passengers feel like they were behind the wheel of a luxury car. Embraer has drawn parallels between the qualities that leather seating brings to its commercial aircraft interiors (for the busy shuttle route between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro) and "the atmosphere of a private executive jet".

And on the question of leather's contribution to greater sustainability, Archie Browning, sales director of Andrew Muirhead & Son, a component



Embraer says leather lends the atmosphere of an executive jet to commercial aircraft.

IMAGE CREDIT: EMBRAER



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of the Scottish Leather Group that specialises in leather for airplane upholstery, believes that tanners are already responding to the needs of these companies. He comments: "Last year, we launched a new initiative, Low Carbon Leather, in response to the growing demand for green credentials relating to upholstery interiors. Working with our customers to help them lower their carbon footprint, while maintaining the quality in product, is essential to the sustainability of most industries."

He offered a recent order from Bahrain's Gulf Air as a good example. The airline decided to use Muirhead's Voyager, a full 1.0 millimetre premium leather, to refit the interiors of its Airbus A320 aircraft. The tanning group insists that Voyager represents no compromise on quality or tensile strength, and meets "the most robust smoke and flame specifications" while weighing around 600 grammes per square metre, 30% less than standard aviation leather.

"Then-senior manager, John Tighe, said the airline's decision to order Voyager was



Archie Browning, sales director of Andrew Muirhead & Son, says tanners such as his company are working hard to make aviation leather lighter, without compromising on the high performance demands leather has to meet for the airline industry.

IMAGE CREDIT: SCOTTISH LEATHER GROUP

based on improving competitiveness, reducing operational costs and offering customers a greener product," Mr Browning continues. "John also said that our Voyager leather offers savings in operational costs due to the lighter weight. Benefits in operational costs will result in Gulf Air burning an estimated \$200,000 less fuel per year in the A320 fleet alone once the fit out is completed (compared to normal leather). This has the knock-on effect of reducing carbon emissions."

He explains that, as part of its ongoing development, Andrew Muirhead & Son has to keep adapting its leather production to answer customer requirements, including making it longer lasting, although his estimate in this regard is more conservative than Lufthansa's. "Yes, part of this is about durability," he says. "Leather wears well, whereas fabric can wear down, discolour and is not necessarily as hygienic as leather. If leather is maintained properly it can last eight to ten years compared to potentially three years of a fabric." ☺



The Legacy 600 Interior. Leather gives a more luxurious look and feel to the cabin.

IMAGE CREDIT: EMBRAER