



When Dubai's Road and Transport Authority launched its metro service in 2009, it decided to put leather on the seats in its Gold Class. Even for short journeys by public transport, it wanted passengers to have access to a touch of luxury.

Leather seats on the metro

A new metro system in Dubai opened for business in September 2009, with the system stretching initially across 52 kilometres around the desert city on the first line, the red line, with the newer green line later adding a further 22.5 kilometres to the network when it opened for business two years later. The initial project took four years to plan and build, at a cost of \$7.6 billion. The authorities in the Emirate forecast initially that the network would take the strain of 200 million passenger journeys each year, reducing congestion

by up to 17% on the roads. Current figures show that the metro system is still to achieve its target in passenger numbers, but the service is popular, regular, clean, cool and cheap.

Go for gold

From the outset, one of the features that RTA has offered commuters is luxury leather upholstery for the seating in its Gold Class, the top of three classes of carriage in each train. Trains usually have five cars, only one of which is Gold Class. Commentators have said that RTA is

using Gold Class, for which tickets are twice as expensive, to try to lure local commuters out of their cars, at least some of the time, but that it's a bit of a losing battle in a location in which, culturally, using public transport is a little *infra dig*. However, wealthy locals have become used to using metro systems while visiting places such as Paris or London, so there may be hope that the barriers will break down. Having a separate carriage with leather-upholstered seats is a gesture, these observers say, to allow wealthy travellers to make it clear that they are not

The Dubai metro began operations in 2009. The government wants it to help relieve the problems of heavy traffic. The operator has included leather-upholstered seats in Gold Class as a way of attracting affluent commuters to public transport.

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using the metro to try to save money.

Inside the typical Gold Class cabin, though, there are only 18 seats. The leather is in attractive, coordinated colours, matching the turquoise and aqua colour scheme of the laminated floor. The headrests and armrests are in the lighter colour, with the seat and back in the darker blue. On a trip from Mall of the Emirates Station to Burj Khalifa that the *World Leather* team took in February 2013, all the seats were occupied and there were another 25 passengers standing. This was at five o'clock in the evening, before the real start of rush-hour. It cost 11 dirhams, around \$3, per person for the short journey.

Cool leather for summer heat

The leather is quite heavily finished, some of it lightly embossed to provide a lightly tumbled appearance. In other sections of the upholstery, the finish is plainer; there is a mixture, to go with the two tones in the colour-scheme. The seats we saw looked as if they have had plenty of wear since September 2009 and have stood up well. The seat felt firm to sit on and supportive. It was reminiscent of many long-distance train seats on European routes, especially in first class, but this was a metro ride through the city. Special pigments, dyes and binders at finishing stage are also in use to offer a 'cool leather' effect, much-needed in a location in which July and August temperatures can go as high as 50°C and humidity levels can reach 100%. 'Cool leather' helps prevent the absorption of heat from the sun so that the surface temperature of the seats can be as much as 20°C lower than an untreated surface might be.

Public perceptions

The frequent Gold Class users we spoke to like it, but businessman Haroun Al Rashid says that even with 'cool leather' it can become uncomfortably hot in warm weather, especially if the carriage is crowded. "Sometimes the metro is good for a



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There is only one Gold Class carriage per train and only 18 seats in the carriage. So at busy times, it's crowded and not always possible to find a seat. Special pigments, dyes and binders at finishing stage are in use to offer a 'cool leather' effect, especially welcome when the temperature approaches 50°C.

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change," he says, "but we love our cars."

Psychology student Suraya Al-Awadhi is a more regular metro user. She says she would like the trains to have more Gold Class carriages to alleviate the problem of crowded cars and being unable to find a seat. She says: "It's true that it does get crowded at peak times,

such as when I'm travelling home from university, and when it's crowded in Gold Class, it's even more crowded in other parts of the train. Other than that, it's good and you can tell the difference; at quieter times you can actually find a seat. You can tell the seats are leather." 🌟