



The language of luxury

Aside from its performance characteristics, leather is prolific across the global air fleet for its aesthetic and tactile qualities. Leading design agencies tell us why airlines favour it to convey brand message and quality.



The First Apartments on Etihad's new A380 feature a wide armchair and an 81-inch bed.

CREDIT: ETIHAD



We've travelled a long way in 100 years. From one route and one passenger on January 1, 1914, to an industry that served 50,000 routes and more than 3.3 billion passengers last year. The world air passenger market is forecast to grow by 5% per year from now until 2019, part of a global industry estimated to be worth \$2.4 trillion this year, according to The International Air Transport Association (IATA).

The good news for aviation-focused tanners is that the use of leather in interiors looks set to continue as airlines find ways to attract passengers and differentiate their offering. Leather offers advantages in terms of both aesthetics and physical properties, and tanneries work hard to produce material that is both soft and technically sophisticated. Its durability makes it a contender for short haul flights, while its association with luxury makes it favoured further forward.

"Leather is seen as a premium product by passengers, who will remember 'those nice leather seats' on a flight, and generally as an enhancement to the inflight experience if used in the correct areas of the aircraft," says Adrian Berry, the founder of Factorydesign, a UK-based agency whose clients include British Airways and Aer Lingus. "I think leather will continue to maintain a strong presence in the cabin and represent a premium product – but not necessarily just in premium zones."

Airlines also need to react to consumers' changing attitudes towards luxury – luxury products and services are increasingly in people's grasp as disposable income grows. Business class is becoming more sophisticated, making airlines consider whether to decommission first class and split business, or up the ante in first.

World-leading design

Confined by space, weight and technical restrictions, designers have rarely been able to radically overhaul interiors, reluctant to veer from a trusted path. But Etihad, whose customer base differs due to the volume of high net worth individuals (HNWIs), chose to set itself apart at the top end by embarking on a six-year radical overhaul of its 787s, A380s and A350s.

Three London-based agencies – Factorydesign, Acumen Design Associates and Honour Branding – were commissioned for the project, a collaboration known as the Etihad Design Consortium (EDC). Factorydesign was tasked with designing the passenger experience and cabin interior elements across all classes, Acumen took responsibility for seating, while Honour Branding coordinated the project and managed the interface with Etihad.

"This is the first opportunity we've had to talk about it," says lead designer Anthony Harcup from Acumen. "It's been six years of back-to-back projects so this is the first time since the lid's been lifted that we can really shout about it."

The design solutions included a VIP cabin called 'The Residence' which includes an en-suite shower and separate bedroom, as well as a personal butler trained at the Savoy Academy in London; the world's first wide-bodied single-aisle first class cabin with individual hotel bedroom 'apartments' containing a separate bed and vanity unit; the business studio will be one of the largest in its class, with highly-customised galleys and lighting; and the space also features a large lobby lounge for premium customers.

"The leather was one of the most enriching parts of the job," admits Mr Harcup. "I worked with Poltrona Frau's project manager Giovanni Meschini for three years to develop a holistic detailing strategy that had hallmark Poltrona Frau characteristics



Etihad's new lobby, which is upholstered in Poltrona Frau leather.

CREDIT: ETIHAD

throughout each class. Often you work with leather companies that are aviation industry suppliers, and sometimes they have some automotive experience, but Poltrona Frau's work is more akin to luxury yachts and high-end furniture, so their craftsmen are second to none. They are artisans and it was fantastic working with them."

Etihad wanted each of the 10 aircraft to feel like a boutique hotel, so each of the Residences has a different theme and colour for the leather: cashmere, chocolate and coffee. Each has a matching thick-pile carpet that took 120 man hours to complete, and hand-inlaid wood veneer tables. "The Middle Eastern airlines have the high net worth customers, so I think that's where you're seeing a proliferation of much more high-end materials. The HNWIs have the same leather in their Porsche or Maserati or at home."

Devil in the detail

Mr Harcup and the Acumen team designed residential-size leather sofas and beds, adding detailing with stitch-work and perforation so the large swathes of leather wouldn't look too plain.

"I had the pleasure of walking the floor of Poltrona's entire plant, getting inspiration from all of their classic furniture, and then working with the prototyping designers, developing the strategies through a number of prototypes, piecing together the different details."

The level of detail was such that they were working with a 127-page stitch document, with every stitch, seam and material termination meticulously specified to a level of detail "commensurate with the automotive industry". However, because Poltrona's leather, sourced from Italian tanneries, was 2mm to 3mm thick, it would not pass the relevant burn tests for the surrounding panels, which had to be clad in Ultraleather, a polyurethane-based synthetic. "This made colour matching a real problem – it depends what light and what angle you're looking at it from. We had companies around the world making different panels, so we have to aggressively police where one panel meets another to make sure all that detailing was exactly right."



A touch of class: VVIP interiors by Gordon + Gaia

The smell of the leather is one of the most important aspects in interiors, according to Romain Sauvage, sales director at French leather-focused company Gordon + Gaia. "It sets the ambiance, it makes the passenger feel like they are already travelling," he explains. "It's smooth, comfortable and soft, and we see it during the shows – people like to touch leather. It's interesting to see people's reactions: some like it to be smooth, but for others smooth leather might as well be plastic, they like to feel the grain."

The company was established, almost by chance, in 2012. Sandrine Boue, the former CEO of a family-owned chemical company focused on railway flooring, was in the process of relocating the business from the south to the north of France. Inspecting some recently purchased buildings with the company's lawyer, she discovered a disused leather workshop, the site of a previously flourishing business serving the automotive sector but which had gone into administration.

"To imagine those smells, those colours, those materials and the expertise disappearing was inconceivable," she says. Holding a private pilot's licence, she spotted a niche in aviation. "Although the connection isn't immediately obvious, the industrial way the French railways work is the same for airlines. It's pretty much the same in terms of application, for the standards and certifications."

The machinery was dusted off and staff rehired. Relationships with tanneries were resurrected and contracts for small aircraft were signed. Ms Boue says they always favour high-quality leathers where possible. "Leather is much more resistant for cleaning, it is much better than E-leather or fabrics. We have to use E-leather if it has been specified, but we always use the real thing if we can."

For refit and maintenance work, they source the leather from the original supplier as the pieces have to be exactly the same as before. For new projects, they coordinate with the designers and tanneries who are able to match the specifications. "We work really closely with designers and architects and we don't want to short cut that relationship, because the power of designers is so rich," says Mr Sauvage. "We prefer to be really good at one thing than average at lots of things."

Success in the VVIP segment also opened the door to luxury yachts when one owner mentioned he also owned a yacht. This turned out to be the 72-metre Dunya-built Axioma, which Gordon + Gaia then fitted out in white leather across the decks and throughout the interiors.

The company now has its sights on commercial aircraft. "Our quality and know-how is not only what you can see – lots of our competitors can make beautiful leather seat covers – but we really understand the fit process and make it simple for the outfitters," he adds. "It's the same in VVIP, even if the work is more precise we always try to make life simple for the company that assembles everything. And that applies whether there are six seats or 200."



When Etihad's new 787 and A380 were launched at the end of last year, they were billed as the single-biggest commitment to cabin interior product design made by any airline in the world. The project has already won a number of awards, including the Overall Winner Award at the London-based SBID International Design Awards 2014, and topped the Premium Class & VIP section at the recent Crystal Cabin Awards, the 'Oscars' of the aircraft industry, held during the Hamburg Aviation Interiors Expo.

"I think leather will always have a place in super first class, because that's what resonates with that customer base – they expect that lavish luxury," adds Mr Harcup. "I think with the super business class it's not as important, but it depends on the airline and what its brand values are – whether it's the value of the offer or whether it's the experience. Etihad are very experience-driven and one of their mottos is that they are outstanding as standard. So it's a no brainer for them to have the most opulent finishes that are available."

Brand message

Away from the upper classes, leather offers a good way to convey brand message and provides a relatively simple opportunity to specify a custom, brand-specific material in the cabin, according to Matthew Fiddimore, an associate at Factorydesign. Its client Singapore Airlines uses leather extensively in its business, first class and premium economy

classes in seating headrests, calf-rests and foot-bars.

"New, precise trimming techniques as well as embossed textures, CNC cut patterns and embroidery enable airlines to develop signature details for their dress covers, for example, Singapore Airlines' quilted stitch patterns," he says. "Leather is a key touch-point for guest experience and gives airlines the freedom to put their distinctive mark on what are generally quite standard cabins."

However, he thinks tanneries could work harder in this area, offering more ideas and solutions for customisation. "Developing bespoke textures, perforations and colours is key to making the leather fit an airline's brand and not the other way around," he suggests.

One company this is key for is US-based Perrone Aerospace. The company was established in 2000 as a manufacturer of performance leathers, importing skins from around the world at a crust stage, and then colouring, flame treating, finishing and certifying them. The group also offers cleaning and repair services and operates the only laser-guided water-jet cutting system in the US.

"Many of the airlines want to build their own brand," Perrone's president, William Perrone, tells us. "The only thing that customers see is the inside of that aircraft so it's a direct extension of their brand, and we help them to build that. This could be through the use of colour, texture, design; embossing, debossing, logos or embroidery."



Mood lighting sets the scene for Emirates' first class passengers.

CREDIT: EMIRATES



US tannery Perrone counts Delta among its 80 airline customers.

CREDIT: DELTA AIRLINES



Thomson's Premium Club features 36-inch leather seats.

CREDIT: THOMSON



Singapore Airlines offers a 'private sanctuary in the sky'.

CREDIT: SINGAPORE AIRLINES

Counting more than 80 airlines in its customer base, including Delta, Saudi Arabian Airlines, Air France and United, the company offers a range of leathers with different attributes. At the top end, Elite is designed to meet the requirements of light jets and is made from premium steer hides, with a lightly snuffed surface to blend areas of naturally varied grain patterns and has a soft, supple hand. Skyline is an aniline-dyed leather with lightly textured-enhanced grain designed for "unsurpassed durability in price-sensitive applications", while its Featherweight offering is a third lighter than standard upholstery leather but retains the tensile strength and durability, says the company. One US carrier reportedly saved over \$15 million per year in fuel costs when it recovered in Perrone's Featherweight leather.

It also offers EnduraLite, a synthetic leather. "The choice depends on the mission of the carrier – whether it's long haul, short haul; low cost versus flagship. In the US, one major consideration is lower cost of ownership, so they like maintainability and longevity, weight is only one factor. We have a product for all applications, and we can only guide them to what's best for them."

Airport lounges

Conveying the brand message can extend from the aircraft into airport lounges, particularly for the premium or long-haul airlines. This includes using the same colours or types of leathers

– albeit with lower performance attributes – and extending it through from when the customer checks in.

At Honour Branding, the third agency in the EDC, this seamless integration of guest experience is vital. It has worked on the rebranding of companies including Saudi Arabian Airlines, and has recently designed various airport lounges in partnership with Regus. One concept targets the mobile worker and features a Thinkpod workspace, while another includes a library-style room, private meeting rooms and a video-conferencing facility. It also worked on the new arrivals lounge that opened at London Gatwick at the end of last year. "If you are a frequent flyer and fly the same airline all the time, it doesn't take long before you get bored. And the most frequent fliers are the most important to those airlines," says Michael Crump, a partner at Honour, on keeping the offering fresh.

Australia's flag carrier, Qantas, uses leather for the furnishings in its lounges, many of which were designed by renowned industrial designer Marc Newson, as well as for the seats and interiors in the first cabin on its A380s and business on its newly refurbished A330s flying domestically. "We use leather to provide a sense of luxury and find the material durable and hard wearing – an important consideration for the interiors of our aircraft, which carry millions of passengers across Australia and around the world each year," a spokesperson told us.

"Leather is the language of luxury," concludes Mr Harcup. "It's the richness, and I think that's what resonates." 🌐