

Ambience at 40,000: Comfort and Safety Factors for the Consumer

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My grade school days were spent in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. On occasion, my parents and I would take a trip to the West Coast. We'd have to first fly to Pittsburgh to connect to a flight to San Francisco. For the first leg of the trip, I remember asking my father if we could fly Trans World Airlines (TWA) instead of Allegheny Airlines. I was already aware of the differences in comfort. TWA offered a four- propeller aircraft, specifically a Constellation, whereas Allegheny meant a two-engine plane with no air-conditioning. As I recall, Allegheny had wall fans on the interior of the aircraft and the noise level was unbearable. It was impossible to speak with someone sitting next to you or to the flight attendant in the aisle,. I remember the color scheme of the Constellation; it was dark green, which included curtains that one could draw across the windows. I later found out that the Constellations used by Trans World Airlines were also used during World War II for military transport. It made sense that their interior color schemes were somewhat military in style. Some photos of these vintage aircraft are located at <http://www.century-of-flight.freeola.com/Aviation%20history/airliners/images3/Martin%202-0-2.jpg> and http://lh6.ggpht.com/_6n3UGF48F4Q/RVvfa0bDABI/AAAAAAAAAcc/t92mSugwR0A/P8020034-Edit.jpg.

Times have changed in terms of interior design, comfort and the airline industry. What kind of color scheme would be most comfortable for a passenger for a short and would it be different for a long-term trip? In terms of food, red and yellow tend to be appetizing colors. Blue and gray are not food colors. I never did understand blue potatoes. However, for interior design of a commercial aircraft, blue and green create somewhat of a peaceful ambience, in addition to creating a feeling of coolness. This would be very helpful when you have a full flight lasting six hours. I recall flying on Hawaiian Airlines between Kauai and Oahu noting that the seat fabrics were a bright pink, orange, and red floral design. It was attention getting but also reflected the local climate and culture. Orange reflects warmth, a characteristic of the Hawaiian Islands; pink may represent something sweet, such as the aroma of tropical flowers.

With respect to interior structural design, curved surfaces and the way light is placed on them can also affect the mood of a passenger during flight. A softer and ambient light creates a relaxing atmosphere. On long flights, lights are dimmed to fool the mind and help passengers avoid jet lag. Another way to deter jet lag is to wear sunglasses before entering the aircraft http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/scotland/4886770.stm and during the entire flight. In an effort not to be recognized, many celebrities employ this method probably not even realizing the ambient benefit.

Upon boarding an aircraft, which offers first-class and economy seating, one usually notices the differences between seat sizes between classes. Whether you notice it or not, airlines have attempted to create more legroom by adjusting the density of seat cushions. This is accomplished with the thickness

of the cushion foam. Adjusting density can add up to 3.5 inches of legroom. Seat frames have also been adjusted,

“Seats designed so that the aluminum frame supports on the bottom of the cushion are moved forward also contribute two to three more inches (five to seven more centimeters) of room for passengers' shinbones.”

<http://www.boeing.com/commercial/news/feature/comfort.html>.

The challenges most airlines face today relate to balancing comfort, design, and fuel efficiency. Safety will always be the most important factor. The weight of interior design will affect the fuel burn of the aircraft. The desires of the customer sometimes outweigh interior aircraft design. Aircraft materials have to go through crash testing to become certificated as usable in an interior. The testing process is very costly, and repetitive. A passenger's perception of quality is also associated with thickness. What is most ergonomically designed is not always the thickest. Materials that are more lightweight are not very often that durable in long flights.

<http://www.flightglobal.com/articles/2009/03/20/324080/cabin-interior-design-weighty-matters.html>. Airlines are torn between what is profitable, listening to passenger demands, addressing what is environmentally conscious, and designing what is ergonomic.

A trend for the future includes the Boeing Dreamliner with a quieter engine design....listen for yourself at

<http://www.newairplane.com/787/innovativefeatures/environmentleadership/quieterairplane/>. The aircraft also offers lighting that changes with the timezones, 30% larger luggage bins, and 19-inch windows that create more light and a greater feeling of spaciousness. The jet lag phenomenon is combated with improvements in air quality, increased humidity, and a lower cabin altitude.

Watching the evolution of interior design for aircrafts has been fascinating during my lifetime. It has affected the passenger's perception of quality service and comfort in this segment of the hospitality industry. More amenities are usually associated with higher expectations. I have a feeling that the days of the dark green Constellations are long gone and will be replaced with a simplistic elegance of ergonomically and environmentally designed craft of the near future.

For more topics related to future design and comfort for the airborne passenger, I would suggest the following sites:

<http://www.airliners.net/aviation-articles/read.main?id=50>

<http://abcnews.go.com/Business/BusinessTravel/popup?id=421831&contentIndex=1&start=false&page=1>

<http://www.flightglobal.com/articles/2009/03/20/324079/flights-of-fancy-what-interiors-demand-attention-in-a-down-market.html> (includes the green movement)