Office in the sky

There are many ways to justify the acquisition of a business jet. But what kind of interior chemistry is required to produce a more meaningful, if not productive, journey? KERRY DIMMER investigates
The appeal of business jet travel is fast acquiring a large following. Using flight time to conduct business 35,000 ft in the air allows busy professionals to maintain tight schedules without the hassle and aggravation associated with commercial airline travel. What makes a privately owned jet even more alluring is the option to customise the interior to provide any level of luxury and functionality one would expect to find in a fully equipped executive office or home.

From the moment that executive business travel was conceived in the late 1920s it was understood that owners and passengers expected the interior fitment of the executive jet to be of a standard even higher than that offered by business and first-class on commercial airlines. Today, in addition to the comfort of luxury elements, high-class business travellers are now also demanding the provision of the most technologically advanced communication devices in order to continue their daily business activities while in the air.

Once a business aircraft has been purchased (usually for millions of dollars) 90% of owners refurbish the interior, generally upgrading it every five years. The fitment and interior design of business jets is a highly specialised service that can only be undertaken by companies that have the approval of aviation authorities like the South African Civil Aviation Authority (SACAA), the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) or the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA).

These organisations have determined a number of space, weight and material restrictions that make aircraft interior designing a safety-focused activity, both from a structural and passenger safety point of view. Authorised refurbishers have to ensure that aviation regulations are adhered to during the fitment of an interior and are held responsible for ensuring that an aircraft does not go into service unless the internal structure of the aircraft is crash-worthy. Pumelani Ndala, the SACAA’s manager of certification engineering, explains that each element of an aircraft has its own, unique benchmark of quality.

There are separate standards for fabrics, paneling, the seats, the floors and so on.
Prior to using a particular product, refurbishers are also required to conduct a burn test on all interior items to establish flammability – we’re not talking just curtain, carpeting, woodworking and panelling, but even the adhesives and foams that will be used.

Certification testing means that nothing is left to chance when it comes to air safety. Ndala points out that aircraft engineers have a reputation for being extremely meticulous, and with good reason.

‘A fire at 41 000 ft is very difficult to extinguish. That is why only aviation-approved organisations are mandated to undertake aircraft work. Likewise, if you want to use a material that does not comply with aviation regulations, only the authorised outfitters will know what means of compliance can be applied to accommodate that application.’

So what does the African business jet traveller want to find in his aircraft?

‘Generally speaking,’ says Ian Waiker of Lanseria Aircraft Interiors, ‘most owners want a modern, comfortable, plush interior with big armchairs, deep pile carpets, soft leather, wood veneer and crystal glasses in cabinets. Bear in mind that these professionals are used to global travel and want to continue to experience the best-of-class in their own jets.’

FA Aircraft Interiors’ Elize Gonzalves agrees.

‘High quality fittings are common for all VIP interiors and most customers request textures like 100% wool carpets and full-leather seats. Customisation on the other hand is a completely different aspect. Many clients will show us a picture of look they like and together with our designers, the planning team will create a scheme that will satisfy the criteria.

‘Being flexible is important, as in some cases we may not even meet the client physically, needing to email our concepts and ideas to them, particularly if they are foreigners,’ she says.

‘We have also been tasked with finding unique and novel ways to reflect the heritage of a country or a personality. In some cases we have even contracted local artists to create works of art that aid in achieving a look that is totally unique.’

If the interior is an opportunity to reflect personal taste then it would appear our elite owners are far more tech-focused than aesthetically adventurous. In general terms, southern African jet owners are rather staid in their choice of interior fitting, selecting colours on the lighter, more conservative spectrum – beige, off-white and grey with, perhaps, a touch of navy or burgundy.

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