

A photograph showing the interior of a business jet cabin. A wooden tray table is extended from the ceiling, holding two glasses. The cabin features leather-upholstered seats and a patterned carpet. The lighting is warm and focused on the tray table.

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



Plush business jet interior with big leather armchairs and bespoke deep pile carpets.



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.

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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. Pfumelani 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, panelling, the seats, the floors and so on.



A business jet being prepared for a custom paint finish

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 curtaining, carpeting, woodwork 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.'

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

'Generally speaking,' says Ian Walker 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 fitment, 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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Consummate class with a touch of the wild

Paul Ludick of Inter Avionics says that being able to entertain yourself and your clients on board has a huge psychological impact.

'On the larger business aircraft, passengers can enjoy the freedom of wireless headsets, which enables them to walk around without missing anything.'

Mobile technology has taken the passenger out of his seat and given him control. Ludick says that business travellers are now boarding

with not just their laptops, but also their own DVD and audio selections loaded onto iPods. These can then be plugged into the a DVD player so that the audio can be distributed to the rest of the cabin via surround sound.

'In some of the top-end installations we will also isolate the aircraft's different areas so that boardroom activity will not impose on those wanting to watch a DVD in another part of the plane,' he says.

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According to Ludick, 'moving map' technology is generating a lot of interest among jet travellers. Like the car GPS systems, a data processor will relay a topographical depiction of the ground below the aircraft, indicating aspects such as political boundaries and rivers.

'We're finding that customers want to be exposed to flight profiles and enjoy watching the real-time cockpit camera feed of takeoff and landing,' he says.

An entry-level avionics package will currently cost in the region of US\$20 000 – US\$30 000. The customer with a propensity for the high tech, on the other hand, will spend up to US\$100 000 for imported aviation-approved brands like Honeywell, Rockwell Collins or Flight Display Systems. For that sort of money Ludick's company will supply: one to two 40" LCD displays; six to eight 20" LCDs; a moving map processor; seven to 10 DVD players; forward-looking cockpit cameras for takeoff and landing viewing; and, says Ludick, 'a chunk of wireless headsets'.

So what exactly can you expect to pay to kit out, say a DC-9, excluding the separately quoted avionics kit? Walker says that a basic fitment will be around US\$31 500 with an extra US\$25 260 if the exterior needs attention. It will take between four and six weeks to install this package.

With the global economy as unsteady as it is right now, you have to wonder how many entrepreneurs will opt for a more exclusive, fully customised, top-end fitment at approximately US\$189 450 for the interior with another almost US\$126 300 for the exterior. As outrageous as it sounds, as engineers build bigger, safer and more technologically sound jets, businesses and private individuals worldwide are placing orders for jets the size of a Boeing 737 and beyond. In these planes it would not be considered radical to include a fully equipped gym, pamper salon, big-screen theatre, cocktail bar, sauna, a gourmet kitchen/galley, vaulted ceilings and any number of private partitions.

Business jets are becoming as comfortable, indulgent and versatile as any of the deluxe penthouse suites or boardrooms that super-executives enjoy on the ground. But despite all this sky-high aircraft luxury, one almost has to pity the business jet set who can now never escape a ringing mobile phone or an urgent email. Soaring to new heights is now a 24-hour job. **AD**