

# CABIN VISTAS

Jennifer Coutts Clay, author of *Jetliner Cabins: Evolution & Innovation*, discusses the resurgence of first class, the growth of premium economy, and developments in accessible travel

*The Jetliner Cabins: Evolution & Innovation e-book is now in its fourth edition*

**D**uring 2024, air travel powerfully rebounded to pre-Covid levels. Demand is outstripping supply in some regions, and analysts are predicting there will be a record-breaking five billion passenger embarkations on the world's scheduled airlines by the end of 2024. Air fares are at a historic low, and corporate travel is booming (even though hotel rates have significantly increased).

In recent years, a number of airlines retreated from the aerial battlefield of first class. Concurrently, the private (charter) aviation sector grew rapidly, attracting ultra-high-net-worth passengers to check in at exclusive, fast-track, executive jet terminals. This top-level market segment has a huge range of options, given the availability of 24/7 concierge facilities, full-size beds, and onboard catering to a five-star hotel standard for both short- and long-haul charter flights. For example, the Bombardier Global 6000 can sleep eight passengers and fly for up to 14 hours.



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## CABIN ENHANCEMENTS

The exciting news is that cabin upgrades, reconfigurations and retrofits are currently a major focus across the airline industry. These upgrades offer improved value for many customers in the main classes of service, and also present up-selling opportunities for airlines.

Despite post-Covid supply-chain delays, a number of leading airlines are competing ferociously against the growth of the private aviation sector by developing their first-class cabins to offer an unprecedented range of high-end features such as floor-to-ceiling privacy partitions, individual wardrobe storage areas, adjustable mood lighting, double beds, ensuite bathrooms, shower compartments, sitting rooms with multi-screen displays, Bluetooth technology, cocktail lounges, personal butler service, and complimentary limousine transfers.

Super-luxurious developments of this calibre can confer a 'halo effect' that will mark these airlines as having a special and distinctive status or identity, similar to the impact made by Concorde, the world's only supersonic passenger jet, operated by Air France, British Airways, Braniff, and Singapore Airlines between 1976 and 2003.

Many airlines are now flying business-class cabin configurations that are similar to the first-class accommodations of a decade or so ago. The development of

1. ONE OF THE MOST LUXURIOUS FIRST-CLASS EXPERIENCES: SINGAPORE AIRLINES' A380 SUITE

2. LETRONICS' WL780 TRANSFER LIFT FOR PRMs

3. THE WL780 PROVIDES A COMFORTABLE AND DIGNIFIED TRANSFER EXPERIENCE FOR PRMs

product features and customer benefits is being driven by new market segments, such as 'bleisure travel' (combined business/leisure) and the 'digital nomads' (remote, online tech workers).

The most noticeable product development has been the installation and/or enlargement of premium-economy class cabins. These layouts resemble some of the business-class cabins that used to fly in earlier years, with a seat pitch of 36in (91.44cm) or more, generous recline facilities, and enhanced inflight service standards. Some airlines have reported that they are expanding their premium-economy-class cabins because they have become major money-makers.

In the USA, even the low-fare, low-cost airlines are upgrading their traditional all-economy-class cabins to provide 'privileged' seats with extra legroom and/or recline, free wi-fi and inflight entertainment and connectivity (IFEC), advance seat selection, adjacent empty middle seats, snack-box catering, and larger overhead baggage



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stowage bins. Air travellers are witnessing the end of the traditional commoditised, low-margin operations.

**SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS**

And, at long last for passengers with accessibility needs, jetliner designers, advocacy groups and regulatory authorities are working jointly to develop ways to secure personal wheelchairs inside the aircraft cabin, at designated locations in specified seat-rows. Delta Air Lines and PriestmanGoode are pioneering in this space. Many airlines now also offer IFE content curated for passengers who suffer from visual impairment, hearing difficulties or cognitive problems.

At the 2024 APEX Global Expo in Long Beach, another important advancement in accessibility was demonstrated by Letronics. The WL780 Transfer Lift for passengers with reduced mobility (PRMs) provides a comfortable and dignified transfer experience. At the door of the aircraft, the PRM is lifted out of the wheelchair into a lifting sling, similar to the sling element of the Hoyer Lift used in hospitals. The sturdy WL780 frame apparatus can be turned to navigate entryway corners, even in small



regional jets. Measuring just 14in-wide, it fits into all commercial aircraft aisles, including herringbone configurations. The Transfer Lift can be manoeuvred along the aisle to the passenger's designated seat-row, where the wheelbase of the frame can be widened to fit over the row behind and in front of the passenger's seat. The passenger can then be safely and comfortably lowered from the frame into the aircraft seat.

More information about the ever-changing world of aircraft cabin interiors is provided in *Jetliner Cabins: Evolution & Innovation*, an interactive e-book now in its fourth edition. ✖

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