grand designs

Comlux Aviation has added design and completions to its services portfolio – so what's on offer?

Liz Moscrop Business Jet Interiors International

Get ready to get more – Swiss operator Comlux Aviation is underlining its slogan with hard cash, evolving from a VVIP aircraft charter and management company to a comprehensive private aviation services provider. At this year's EBACE show, the company announced that it had appointed Alexandra Brökelmann as art director of a brand new division, Comlux Creatives, headed up by Isabelle Bevilacqua. The pairing makes for a powerful creative force. Bevilacqua has decades of experience in aviation and was formerly a flight attendant for Comlux's charter operations. She understands what it is like to fly in the back and has brought her expertise to bear on ground-breaking new cabin designs.

A trained interior architect, Brökelmann was formerly with Lufthansa Technik and is recognised as one of the world's leading designers. "The reputation of Comlux for innovative new-build and refurbishment projects, combined with the group's expertise as an operator, makes Comlux Creatives more than just another designer," says Brökelmann.

As a part owner, Bevilacqua has a slice of Comlux and is revelling in her new role: "To be involved in creating a cabin was my dream," she says. "I have worked with Gore Design, Associated Air Center, Lufthansa Technik and Bombardier Midcoast, so to be investing in the future and creating something concrete of your own is exciting." She points out that the company's activities are complementary and all help support Comlux's customers through the aircraft acquisition and ownership process.

Her work was on display at the NBAA convention in Orlando this October, in the form of the first VVIP Airbus Corporate Jetliner (ACJ). "Although we have brought other corporate aircraft before, this is the first truly VIP product we have taken to NBAA," said David Velupillai, marketing director for Airbus's executive and private aviation division, at the show. The aircraft is furnished in light colours with 12 fully reclining first-class seats, plus a high-end

1. Comlux's ACJ has been designed with an interior to appeal to Middle Eastern customers

2. The ACJ's rear section features 12 fully reclinable first-class seats

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3-4. The Comlux ACJ is one of very few charter aircraft to feature a private bedroom with separate bathroom and shower

surround entertainment system and several wide TV screens. It seats up to 19 passengers. It is one of very few aircraft on the exclusive charter market that features a private bedroom and bathroom with shower. To add to the comfort level on board, the centre cabin area is configured as a living room area with lounge and dining room sections.

"The cabin is based on the Prestige, but working with Alexandra, I used my understanding of what passengers want to modify it slightly," explains Bevilacqua. "For example, it is the first time you'll see an L-shaped divan with a long cushion on the side in an aircraft."

Bevilacqua also fought for more tactile surfaces, including wood with a natural grain, which was one of the most praised features at NBAA. "It is a 'Zen' aircraft," she says. "I wanted the feel of a calming spa, so that passengers would feel totally relaxed."

Brökelmann famously designed the interior for the first Airbus A318 Elite, which entered service with Comlux in May 2007. Designed for 18 passengers, the three-zone cabin can sleep eight and is divided into a lounge, a dining area and a stateroom. The fully enclosed galley is at the front and there are two lavatories, one in the midsection and one aft.

Brökelmann says it takes years of experience to work on aircraft. "In this instance, I created quite a masculine feel," she says. "I wanted to ensure it wasn't too dark and oppressive, so I chose light accent colours and walls to complement the dark seating." She also added horizontal silver lines that cut across the dividing doors to broaden the midsection, increasing the sense of space on board.

Bevilacqua and Brökelmann evidently spark ideas off each other, engendering a lively working atmosphere. Bevilacqua says that it has not been difficult to draw new talent to the fledgling company and that several people have approached her for work. "We are young and small – people are attracted to our flexibility and the spirit in the team."

The mission Comlux Creatives offers customers a complete service, including interior and exterior aircraft design, as well as cabin decoration, art concepts, completion management and supervision. The company created the new department to meet increasing demand for specific creative services. "The strengthening of our team and the setting up of a distinct creative division allows us to respond to exacting customer demands and establish design as a real competitive advantage for Comlux," says Richard Gaona, Comlux's president and CEO. "The market is going through a period of change and growing in sophistication."

Luca Madone would agree. He heads up the company's charter sales division and stresses the importance of the interior to Comlux's business model. "The reason clients book an aircraft like the A319 is the interior," he says. "Such an aircraft is neither fast nor economic. People welcome the design. To have a round table on board is unique and perfect for a business meeting. Having a private bedroom is also much appreciated."

He adds that light colours are popular in the Saudi Arabian market, with Europeans opting for darker schemes, such as that found in the A318 Elite. Part of Comlux's modus operandi is to meet customer needs without huge discussions. "We know how to tailor our service towards the customer without saying a word," says Madone. "A Russian client will come onto a Russian aircraft and a Saudi

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5. Comlux's A318 Prestige

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Arabian customer onto a Saudi aircraft. We provide what they want."

Corporate Growth Comlux has been aggressively expanding over the last few years and now provides a complete range of services, through buying and selling aircraft, to design and completions and management. There are four divisions under the group banner: Fly Comlux, Comlux Creatives, Comlux Completion and Comlux Transactions. The company has offices in Malta, Kazakhstan, Moscow, Indianapolis, Toulouse and soon Bahrain.

Earlier this year the company demonstrated its ambitions in the completions market by taking a 40% stake in the Airbus Corporate Jet Centre (ACJC) in Toulouse via Comlux Completion. The subsidiary is a joint venture between Comlux and the MAZ Consultancy in Bahrain. Chief executive Mohammed Al Zeer acknowledges the importance of the contract to Comlux. "We are honoured to have been selected by Airbus to be a real commercial partner in the business of VIP widebody completion," he says.

Comlux Completion spread its wings still further this autumn when it announced at the NBAA that it had acquired the Indianapolis Jet Center (IndyJet), to be renamed Comlux Completion USA.

According to the company, its vision is to become one of the leading providers of VIP cabin completion services. It currently owns and operates Bombardier and Airbus business jets and designs VIP cabins for both types. Bevilacqua says: "Now that we have invested in IndyJet, we can tap into the American Dream. They have so much knowledge."

With 30 years' experience under its belt, IndyJet beefs up Comlux's offering still further. The US company is an authorised GE Engine and Piaggio service centre and Rockwell Collins avionics dealer, with specialties that include CRJ200 executive conversions, as well as Learjet, Challenger, Boeing and Airbus maintenance, refurbishments and completions. "It is an exciting time for Comlux," says Gaona. "The acquisition represents a significant step in the development of our North American operations, increasing our presence in the largest market in the world for business aviation, and cementing our position as a first-class provider of cabin completion services."

Although it has added the North American and French bases to its portfolio, Comlux currently has capacity for around four design projects a year on large cabin aircraft. However, should market demand dictate, Bevilacqua says she would simply expand her team and take on more designers.

The rest of the offering With local offices based in Zurich, Comlux Transactions has also established a solid relationship with the most important private banks worldwide to assist its customers with financing. It is currently offering three green aircraft for sale on its website, an Airbus ACJ, an Airbus A318 Elite and a Bombardier Global Express XRS. Although it will not disclose details of transactions, at the time of going to press its 2008 deals included nine large- and mid-size cabin aircraft, predominantly Airbus and Bombardier jets, although the company also brokered an Embraer Legacy 600 and a Gulfstream G550.

Geographically, Comlux has set up shop in key strategic locations worldwide. It has been in Moscow since 2004 and this year established its operation in Almaty, Kazakhstan in response to the strong increase in demand for local charter services over the past three years. Comlux KZ operates two Bombardier Challenger 850 jets under a commercial Kazakh AOC and will add a Challenger 605 by the end of the year. The group has also had an operational centre in Malta since September 2008, positioned to take advantage of the junction between Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

So what next for the Swiss entrepreneurs? Plenty according to Bevilacqua. Her team is now working on an A330 completion with Lufthansa Technik in Hamburg. "Using the space on the A330, we are already in another dimension," she says. "There are so many possibilities, like where to put the bedroom." Is she enjoying the project? "Absolutely," she says, remaining true to Comlux's style of offering 'more': "The bigger the better as far as I'm concerned." END

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NOW THAT WE HAVE INVESTED IN INDYJET, WE CAN TAP INTO THE AMERICAN DREAM