

Beautiful on the Inside

by Tim Kern, CAM

Comlux A320 interior



Unlike most of the airframe, the interior of a corporate aircraft can reflect its owner's taste. Whether you want a business office, high-altitude sleeper, convention centre or airborne family coach, the interior design can be, within wide limits, whatever you need. Although they may be wide, the limits need to be understood.

Everything is different in an airplane: the walls are long and straight, but not vertical; headroom is limited; traffic flows are restricted; weight and its distribution are important; materials are specialised; repairs are regulated and costly; aircraft availability is minimal. Some shapes work well; several are mandated. All components must meet strict regulations and strict smoke and fire tests.

Tim Callies, Head of Creatives at Comlux, did not begin his career in aircraft. "When I started," he explains, "I thought, 'I can make anything I want!' But it's not like that. Everything is expensive for a reason. It's best to hire an expert, so you don't have to do it over."

Your team will work with aviation-specialty suppliers. "It's a niche market," says Lindsay Boatright, Comlux's Lead Designer at the company's Indianapolis facility. "Everything is important."

From pillows to electronic components, everything must pass aviation tests. That means almost nothing is readily available – it all comes from specialty suppliers. "Fabrics, particularly, get discontinued often," warns Boatright. "When you find what you want, order immediately – and order plenty. Even if it's available later, dyes may not exactly match and many are impossible to duplicate. Some woods are simply unique. Get spares of everything! And remember that you must have quality from the beginning. Quality is not automatic."

Plan Carefully

"You pick a core design. Then there's the custom work. Even though the design takes a long time, once it is locked in, work goes fast, and changes are expensive," says Callies. "Maybe there are two years of planning; then the opportunity to work on the airplane may not happen for another two. So, don't be too trendy."

"Fabrics pass or fail a fire or smoke test, batch by batch," explains Boatright. "Overall, though, luxury and certification drive costs. The more unique the request, the higher the certification cost."

Boatright urges owners to think realistically: "You sit in a showroom chair for a few minutes; it feels stiff. But you'll be sitting in it for hours. If it's too soft, it won't be comfortable on long flights."

"Customers need to understand the narrowness of an aircraft," notes Callies. "Though many initially think they'd like their fabric to go all the way to the floor [where the cabin is narrowing], they should note that peoples' feet are forced into narrow areas; walls will get scuffed by shoes." >>

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