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Stand by your seats: Interiors expert tackles timely topic

By Mary Kirby on July 29, 2009 9:27 AM | Permalink | Comments (0) | TrackBacks (0)



Standing-seat concepts are in the fray, following Spring Airlines' confirmation it has spoken to Airbus about adding standing-seats on its Airbus A320s, and Ryanair's query of passengers on the subject (they are keen to oblige if their ticket is free). But are standing-seats a realistic option?

I asked aircraft interiors expert Jennifer Coutts Clay of Jetliner Cabins fame (pictured left) to share her thoughts on the matter. And boy did she deliver. Below is the full text of Clay's guest blog. Are you ready for a new paradigm?

STAND BY YOUR SEATS

When CEO Michael O'Leary announced that he might install a special area for stand-up high-density-type seating in the new Jetliners on order for Ryanair, reactions from the general public ranged from giggles of disbelief to shock and awe - not to mention a frisson of horror. Just imagine being strapped to some kind of bar stool for take-off and landing, and then standing up all the time throughout the flight, squashed against who-knows-who or who-knows-what!

But there is an interesting and relevant historical precedent which eventually turned out to be an enormous and enduring success. At the end of the 1800's, in central London, there was a social revolution in concert-going circles. Up to that time, classical music events were attended mainly by formally dressed sociable notables, who sat in serried ranks of theatre-style seats that were positioned in parallel rows. But in 1895 - amid cheers and jeers - Roger Newman, the founder of the 'Promenade' concerts, declared that he was going to make his annual series of performances available not just to the high-end cognoscenti but also to audiences who, hitherto, had not enjoyed access to such cultural delights.

Instead of installing a traditional seating layout in the stalls section of the Queen's Hall auditorium, Mr Newman organized a cheap and spacious EMPTY area to attract a radically new market segment of customers called 'Promenaders'. The intrepid pioneers were invited to 'promenade', or walk around, wearing everyday clothing - and they were encouraged to stand in groups alongside the orchestra pit.

Mr Newman even installed a fountain to keep everyone cool during the summer months - a note for Mr O'Leary: now that could be a real 'wow' factor for your product branding at Ryanair!

The product advance was perceived as being akin to strolling in the viewing terraces while watching a military parade or sporting event, or strap-hanging inside a crowded train, bus or ferryboat when there were no seats available. In the 21st century, a modern parallel would be the close-up physical group encounters as witnessed at current pop or jazz festivals.

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POWERED BY



This year at the Royal Albert Hall (the home of the 'Proms' concerts since 1941) of the 6,000 places available every night for the highly acclaimed series of broadcast performances, 1,400 tickets were allocated for sale to standing-area customers - principally students and tourists - at just UK£5-00 (five UK pounds) each, the price of a cup of coffee in a smart restaurant. Anyone who has ever spent a stand-up evening squashed against an army of aficionados, and within a fiddle-bow's length of fortissimo-style renditions of the grandest works by the greatest composers, will attest that the experience is unique, inspiring and incomparable. And long may it continue!

Question: Would Mr O'Leary's proposed aerial stand-up revolution meet with similar success? Concepts for stand-up seating have been presented at serious aviation conferences over the years, and the main topic of discussion has always been the potential testing processes necessary to achieve certification status for high-density-type seating options. Preliminary sketches showed structures reminiscent of vertical spray-tanning booths, fun-fair joy-ride cabs, funicular gondolas or avant-garde ski-lifts. Clearly, the technical requirements to develop stand-up seats suitable for use on aircraft would be extremely complicated. Other questions included:

How will safety procedures be implemented in the stand-up section of the cabin in the event of an emergency?

How will cabin crews be able to monitor and manage the flights?

How will passengers be protected during periods of unforeseen air turbulence?

What will happen to the closely packed group during take-off and landing?

Will children, pregnant women and people with disabilities have access to this new class of travel?

How will individuals cope if they feel sick or faint?

Some critics have dismissed Mr O'Leary's announcement as nothing more than an attention-grabbing PR ploy, pointing to the fact that his Boeing 737-800 jetliners are already 'maxed out' i.e. carrying the total number of passengers allowed under the specific aircraft type and model certification. But could there be a deep-logic plan in the air? If the existing permitted number of passengers could be huddled together in stand-up seating zones in, let's say, two or three 'sardine-can sections', then the other parts of the cabin could be opened up and used for different purposes.

Stand-up-seating passengers would be glad to stretch their legs by visiting the attractions on offer a.g. revenue-generating programs such as: pay-as-you-eat-and-drink cafeterias, pay-for-your-shower-and bathroom cubicles, pay-for-your Internet access to information and business services, entertainment and shopping galleries - or how about on-board casinos for gambling enthusiasts? This algorithm would not be new in the aviation sector: at major airports, passengers are typically herded into narrow corridors and scrunched into corners at check-in points and boarding gates while retail stores and commercial outlets monopolize the main areas of prime space.

From the customer point of view, stand-up-seating areas in the aircraft cabin would be welcomed more for ultra-short-haul hops (the aptly named 'banana flights') than for long-haul trans-oceanic or trans-continental multi-stop operations. Of course it would be necessary to explain clearly that the bar-stool brigade, albeit corralled in clusters, would not actually be tethered together as for a tug-of-war contest. And yes, this dramatically different configuration might well operate smoothly if all the passengers could be guaranteed to be of relatively small stature.

But what about everyone else? Well, if he can resolve the issues mentioned above, and if he can set his air fares at - or below - the cost of a cup of coffee, Mr O'Leary will probably succeed in generating an endless supply of aficionados beating a pathway to his jetliner entry-doors. The potential customer base could comprise not just students and impecunious tourists, but also ships' crews, sports fans, music groups, teams of workers - all those hale and hearty travellers who want to get from point A to point B at coffee-cup air fares.

Just think of the product launch buzz! The music theme selection for the boarding recording could be Sir Elton John belting out his hit tune "I'm Still Standing". And the advertising slogans? How about: "Fly to your dream location...Don't miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity...Zero-gravity coffee-cup air fare...An unforgettable experience...To be squashed up against the most perfect who-knows-who or who-knows-what!"

Bon voyage, everyone! And now we just need a catchy name for this lucky new market segment.... Stand by for take-off? The captain's command takes on a whole new meaning!

Jennifer Coutts Clay

www.JetlinerCabins.com

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Standing up for new seats



01 SEPTEMBER, 2009 | SOURCE: FLIGHT INTERNATIONAL | BY: MARY KIRBY | PHILADELPHIA

Every few years a news story breaks that suggests a particular airline or airframer is ready to make a bold move in the aircraft interiors space by adopting standing-seat configurations for short-hop flights or economy-class stacked sleepers for long-haul travel. And every few years a bevy of naysayers emerges to tell the world that radical seating designs are nothing more than "half-baked" ideas or "pie in the sky" fantasies.

In recent months, eyebrows were raised by Spring Airlines' admission that the Chinese low-cost carrier has held initial talks with Airbus to add standing-seats on its A320 narrowbodies to increase by 40% the number of passengers it can carry.

But sceptical curiosity turned to disbelief when Ryanair chief executive Michael O'Leary - known for his often outrageous publicity stunts - quickly wrestled the headlines from Spring by announcing that the Irish low-cost carrier was looking at vertical seating for its Boeing 737 narrowbodies.

Ryanair also launched a poll to gauge demand for the solution, which it says would allow passengers to travel - for free - in "a secure upright position on short flights of approximately 1h".

Airborne Hotel

© **Airborne Hotel**

While Ryanair succeeded in grabbing attention with its announcement, the resulting media circus did not create an atmosphere for serious dialogue about the viability of standing-seats.

Airbus and Boeing say they are not contemplating standing-seat configurations. But many interiors experts are now coming forward to suggest standing-seats - and their horizontal brothers, stacked sleepers - should not be viewed as obscure ideas lurking outside the realm of possibility. And many of these same specialists say Asia could prove the launching pad for one or both.

STAND BY FOR TAKE-OFF

With respect to standing-seats, "everybody in the industry has thought about this. It's not a new idea. We just haven't come up with an answer yet," says Vern Alg, an aircraft interiors consultant who previously worked as director, project management at Continental Airlines.

Concepts for stand-up seating have been presented at aviation conferences for years. "Preliminary sketches showed structures reminiscent of vertical spray-tanning booths, fun-fair joy-ride cabs, funicular gondolas or avant-garde ski-lifts. Clearly, the technical requirements to develop stand-up seats suitable for use on aircraft would be extremely complicated," says Jennifer Coutts Clay, interiors expert and author of Jetliner Cabins.

The computerised graphic most recently used by Ryanair to depict vertical seating showed passengers leaning against a padded backboard and held in place with a sort of harness. Spring is said to be looking at barstool-like seating with safety straps.

Many problems must be resolved and questions answered before such contraptions find their way on to actual aircraft, but Coutts Clay says the main topic of discussion "has always been the potential testing processes necessary to achieve certification status for high-density-type seating options".

Those requirements are getting stiffer. While many newly delivered aircraft are already equipped with seats capable of withstanding a 16g dynamic longitudinal acceleration in a crash and configured to limit the risk of severe head injury, the US Federal Aviation Administration this year will make it a requirement.

It is not yet clear if a standing-seat design would pass muster with Chinese regulators.

"In principle, the Chinese could do in their country what they wish. But because of their International Civil Aviation Organisation connection, it's not likely to happen unilaterally but would involve the world community figuring out how to do that," says

Tecop International president Hans Weber.

Shashank Nigam, chief executive of global airline marketing and branding consultancy SimpliFlying, suggests, however, that state-owned Chinese aircraft manufacturers "looking for an edge" and a possible relationship with successful carriers such as Spring would be wise if they were to consider promoting a standing-seat option.

From a cultural standpoint, Asia may also be more accepting of such designs. "You have customers who are not bothered being seated close to one another," says Alg. "People in the USA have a great deal of difficulty getting into a Tokyo subway, but it's not a problem for the Japanese."

Weber agrees, saying: "Anybody who has travelled in Asia, including highly developed Japan, has personally experienced how much standing up you do and how squeezed in you are, and how you must be prepared for that."

Should Airbus and Boeing explore standing-seats? "Frankly, I think that every supplier has to look at these things because they keep coming up and maybe there is a solution out there," says Alg.

Spring Airlines, for one, appears ready to embrace the concept. Zhang Wuan, an official at the Shanghai carrier who works closely with the chief executive, says: "We are planning to have standing seats." He says that initial discussions "with the Airbus side" have taken place to see if "the safety question" can be addressed. "We want to have it so more people can afford to fly," he adds.

MEETING IN THE MIDDLE

Standing-seats have grabbed headlines. However, a premium design consultancy has struck upon a concept that may attract operators interested in high-density configurations but not the hoopla surrounding vertical seats.

UK-based Design Q, which was instrumental in the design of Virgin Atlantic's acclaimed "Upper Class" seats, envisages a solution that entails a row of inward facing seats on each side of the aircraft plus two back-to-back rows down the middle resulting in a configuration whereby passengers are facing each other.

Design Q's preliminary image, revealed to the world for the first time by *Flight International*, "shows a generous gap between each of the seats, which could be reduced, but the centre seats are staggered to coincide with the gaps on the outboard seats", says Design Q co-founder Howard Guy.

Design Q

© **Design Q**

"The seats, although shown down, will automatically lift like a cinema seat. This too considerably helping flow through. This probably will reduce boarding times, which has a value. It would also save costs on each seat and significantly save weight."

As with standing-seats, the biggest hurdle would be testing 16g on a side facing passenger and determining if extra protective structures might be required, which could entail extra cost and extra weight.

Asian carriers, which are known for being more at the vanguard when it comes to innovation in aircraft interiors, are also "key candidates to be the first to explore" stacked sleeper seats, says Carlos Martinez, the brains behind the Airborne Hotel

(Abh) bi-level cabin concept and design, which he says provides sleeper cabin comfort without losing passenger density in the aircraft.

Since 2003, Martinez's designs have been made - and consistently improved - specifically with the Airbus A380 in mind, although he says precise configurations and layouts can be made for the A340, the forthcoming A350 or the Boeing 747, 777 and 787. A physical, full-scale cabin section model of the Abh design/configuration for an A380 premium economy cabin was presented to the public for the first time at this year's Aircraft Interiors Expo in Hamburg. The response was largely positive.

"To our surprise (we expected at least a few), not one person mentioned feeling confined, or ill at ease with their surroundings; instead, they welcomed the prospect of having a certain degree of privacy," says Martinez.

LIE-FLAT EXPERIENCE

A competing product from engineering company MmilleenniumM Group, called the Air Sleeper, is designed for all markets but, like the Abh concept, is particularly focused on a premium economy configuration, which can support a 1.9m (6ft 3in) lie-flat and horizontal experience.

The solution "is very much like most business-class standard seats now around the world with a comparable width, but with about two to three times the number of seats as in conventional business class, thereby reducing cost per seat for the airlines", says MmilleenniumM Group chief executive A I "Indi" Rajasingham.

He adds: "A business-class type seat that takes up half the space can be priced at a little over half the conventional business price and still make more money for the airline - this is the space where the emerging Asian market tsunami lies."

Malaysian low-cost, long-haul carrier AirAsia X says it is open to exploring stacked sleeper seats for its newly ordered Airbus A350s. "The timing of the requirements and specifications [that we will] have to lay down for those deliveries I think is going

to coincide with further developments in the interiors market and give us the opportunity with that aircraft to explore some of these new options," says Tim Claydon, a director and consultant for the carrier.

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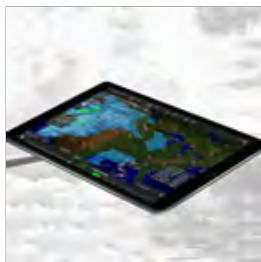
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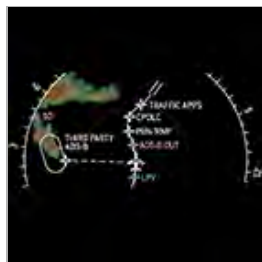
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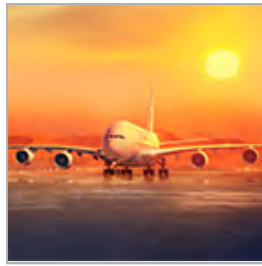
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