

Qatar raises the bar on luxury

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Qatar Airways believes a distinct corporate-jet style lounge area in the first-class cabins of its new Airbus A340-600s will give it the edge over rivals **Emirates** and **Etihad Airways** in the ultra-competitive battle for premium traffic to and from the Middle East.

The airline unveiled a mock-up of the concept at the ITB travel fair in Berlin in early March. The 2.4m- (7.9ft)-long area features a stand-up bar, teak wooden tables and leather sofas for six people, and is separated from the first-class cabin by a divider.

The area is between the first-class and business-class cabin. To create the space, the airline removed one row of first-class seats, leaving room for two rows of four-abreast pods in first class itself. Passengers can move into the bar area to eat, meet or socialise but will have to return to their assigned seats for take-off and landing.

The philosophy is to “pull first away from business”, says Stephen Vella, an adviser to the airline who helped design the concept. “On a lot of airlines, you are beginning to get poor differentiation between the two classes. We want to get that distinction back for our premium customers.”

Qatar Airways is also revamping its business-class product. The A340-600s will have 42 seats in business class, five rows of six-abreast seats forward of Door 2, where a new “uniquely sculptured” galley and entrance will be sited, and two rows aft of the door.

The first of Qatar Airways’ four A340-600s on order goes into service on **London Heathrow** to Qatari capital Doha in July and will be joined by the second three weeks later. The third and fourth come on stream in October and early next year, respectively.

Once **Qatar Airways** secures rights to fly to the USA later this year, the first two A340-600s will move to launch a new daily New York route: the concept is “really designed for passengers travelling over 10h”, says Vella. The other two will be used to launch its first Australian service, to Melbourne.

Qatar Airways has options on six further A340-600s, which chief executive Akbar Al Baker says will be used on other long-range routes, such as to Japan. The concept will also be used on the airline's 60 A350s, for which it has signed a commitment but not an order. But Qatar Airways' two A380s – due to go into service at the end of the decade – will have “something completely different” for their first-class offering, promises Al Baker. The airline worked with Dutch company Driessen on the lounge concept and Al Baker says the aim was to come up with something modular and simple. “We did not want to go overboard,” he says. “When we sell the airplane, it can be removed. There is no big structural modification involved.”

Vella says he expects Airbus to “steal” some of Qatar Airways' ideas when it unveils its own A350 cabin concept at next week's Aircraft Interiors Expo in Hamburg.

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