

Airlines Add Mood Lighting to Chill Passengers Out

New Boeing and Airbus models offer cabin designers splashy ways to engage passengers with light



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Interior designers for airlines across Europe, Asia, and the U.S. have a new consideration when it comes to onboard products and service: How's the lighting? Designers are starting to experiment with new technologies that let them illuminate the cabin in all kinds of hues. Is a pinkish-purple glow suitably soothing for boarding? Does the "amber warmth" programmed for dinner service offer flight attendants enough light by which to serve? And is the cabin at bedtime too dark? Restrooms must be located.



Source: American Airlines via Bloomberg

This mood-lighting capability arises from new light-emitting diode (LED) technologies that Airbus and Boeing sell as options on their new A350 and 787 Dreamliner models, respectively. LED cabin lights are expected to last roughly 10 to 20 times longer than traditional lights; Boeing says its 787 cabin lights are good for 50,000 hours. Both manufacturers used LEDs in some earlier models, but airline designers say

the two new long-haul planes offer them a cabin palette that has never before been available.

“We’ve always wanted to create a different kind of atmosphere aboard our aircraft and light plays exactly into our hands,” says Nik Lusardi, design manager at Virgin Atlantic Airways, one of the pioneers of using mood lighting during flight. “You can get people energized or you can relax people very, very quickly,” Lusardi said.



Virgin Atlantic Airways

As of now, cabin lights basically have two settings: on and off. That accounts for the jarring “lights on!” moment during an overnight, trans-Atlantic flight before flight attendants prepare to serve a mini-breakfast. You may have been asleep or enjoying the relaxing effects of a drink — and suddenly you were not.

The cabin “goes from darkness to light in three seconds,” drawing passenger complaints, says Finnish designer Vertti Kivi, who has done Finnair lounges and recently finished work on the interior of the airline’s new A350s, which begin commercial service in October. “They all had to wake up when the lights were turned on so it gives an opportunity for us.”

A better way, Kivi said, is to have cabin light that rises gradually, much the way a sunrise transitions from faint pink to warm glow to sunlight. “People have a jet lag and [designers] can already start to think both how to behave to prevent jet lag as much as possible,” he said. The Finnair A350 cabin has two dozen light settings, aligned with stages of a long-haul flight. It will also feature warmer, amber colors on flights arriving in Asia and cooler “Nordic blue” hues when flying into Finland. As night falls during flight, Kivi designed a roughly 20-minute “sunset” in the cabin. Another natural option Finnair may replicate in flight? “We also have the speciality of the Northern Lights,” he says, noting Finland’s northern latitudes.

Virgin Atlantic has five primary color periods on its 787 flights: rose-champagne for boarding, purple-pink for drinks, “amber” for dining, another for the pre-sleep period called “work-rest-play,” a silvery glow for overnight sleep, and a waking color. Lusardi said his team, which pushes its lighting changes to aircraft electronically from Virgin’s U.K. headquarters, has banned greens and blues. They’re not Virgin Atlantic colors, nor do they make food and drink look particularly appealing.

American Airlines, which began experimenting with LED light options in 2011, ahead of the delivery of the company’s first Boeing 777-300ER jumbo jets, has also banished green lighting from the cabin. Like Virgin Atlantic, American uses amber during the dinner service, “sort of like candlelight in a restaurant,” said Alice Liu, managing director of

onboard products. For sleep periods, it uses a deep blue, which designers chose after considering — and rejecting — a reddish glow. “Red is sometimes associated with fire,” Liu said — never a good thing on an airplane.

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