

# oceanview

Philippine Airlines has introduced new interiors inspired by the carrier's home coastline on its latest 777-300ERs

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Designer Daniel Baron is standing in his Tokyo office, throwing lavatory floor samples onto the carpet. After a moment of staring at brown and blue vinyl rectangles from French manufacturer Gerflor – left hand on his chin, right on his hip – he smiles. “This is what I do all day,” he says. “Sometimes I put carpet patterns under the table so I can gauge what the passenger is actually going to see. It’s not going to be this bright on an aircraft.”

It’s not how you would expect key aesthetic decisions to be made for an aircraft interior redesign like the one Baron did for Philippine Airlines’ (PAL) new 777-300ERs. The first of the airline’s two £170 million aircraft debuted in late November; the second joined the fleet in January.

Baron, who runs design firm Lift Strategic Design, is using a bit of hyperbole to make a point: that unless you work for those few airlines with deep pockets, there’s always a bit of improvisation involved. “It can be primitive,” says Baron, who grew up in cities along the US East Coast. “There isn’t the money to make a mock-up centre where you can do this. You have to innovate while you simulate.”

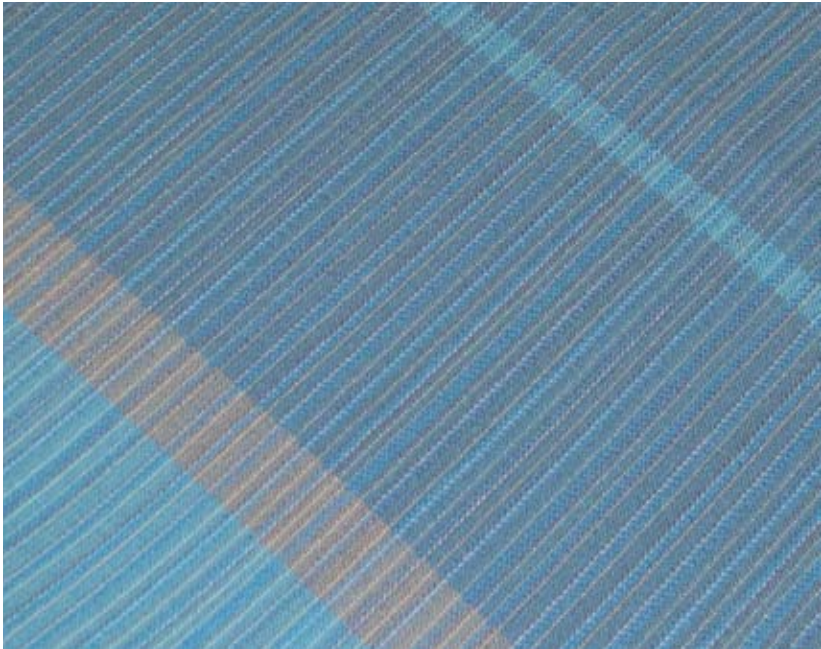
**MORE FOR LESS** The world’s richest airlines boast big product development teams, fancy design centres, and plenty of cash. Like most, though, Philippine Airlines has to make do with a lot less. So when the Asian carrier hired Baron to redo the interior for its 777s, it mainly asked for new seat covers, carpet, lavatories and decorative laminates.



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AS WITH ANY MAKEOVER, BARON HAD TO FIND THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN NOVELTY AND FAMILIARITY



Back in June 2007, Baron had pitched three themes to the airline's product development team in Manila. Two stuck: evening breeze and ocean view. The company's senior management liked the second idea, which would hint at the country's coast seen from the window of a resort. "It had to communicate to the two main groups," says Baron. "There are a lot of people from the Philippines who work overseas. When they get on a Philippine Airlines aircraft after being away for several years they should instantly feel at home... and for the foreigners, it should instantly say you're almost there."

The work began three months later. As with any makeover, Baron had to find the right balance between novelty and familiarity. The cabin interior had to look new enough so that passengers would notice. But it couldn't be too radical for the country's oldest and largest airline, whose loyal customers might not want too much change.

The airline had asked Baron to work off a coastal theme that it had introduced for its medium-range A319 and A320 aircraft in 2006. Maver Mayuga, a manager in the airline's cabin and inflight entertainment development division, says the company wanted it to be obvious to anyone who set foot on board the 777s that these were brand new aircraft.

The 777-300ERs have 42 Recaro CL 6510 business-class (which PAL calls Mabuhay Class) lie-flat-at-an-angle

seats at 78in pitch; and 328 seats at 33-34in pitch in economy (Fiesta Class). Seats in business are arranged in a slightly staggered 2-3-2 layout, while economy sees a 3-4-3 formation. Every seat has access to the Panasonic eX2 IFE system. Philippine Airlines is waiting on four more 777s, according to Boeing.

**TOUGH TIMES** The redesign comes months after the airline announced that it was cutting jobs and overseas flights. Last August, the company said it had posted a £200 million loss in the fiscal year through March 2009, and blamed the global financial crisis and economic downturn. Meanwhile, the company has begun to rely more on medium-sized aircraft for regional flights. "We haven't heard any update on the cuts so I think they're still ongoing," says Grace Cerdania, head of research at F. Yap Securities. "It's a step in the right direction."

As PAL struggles to turn things around, its low-cost rivals are thriving. Cebu Pacific Air, the country's second-largest airline, got its start in 1996, but its discounts for price-conscious travellers and offbeat services – flight attendants lead passengers in sing-alongs and games – have helped shake up the domestic market. On 9 March, Cebu said it would raise about £175 million through an initial public offering to fund the purchase of more aircraft as it expands its overseas routes. Analysts say the rivalry has

- 01. New business-class fabric, supplied by Botany Weaving
- 02. Each PAL 777-300ER features 42 business-class seats at 78in pitch



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BUSINESS PEOPLE  
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forced Philippine Airlines to work harder to defend its domestic market share, currently around 37%. “Consumers don’t base their decisions to fly Philippine Airlines just because it’s the oldest or the largest airline,” says Cerdenia.

PAL wouldn’t comment on whether the cost-cutting had affected design decisions on the new 777-300ERs. Baron also declined to talk about the project’s budget. But it’s hard to imagine that the company-wide restructuring didn’t have some effect on the redesign.

**SHADES OF BLUE** PAL asked Baron to work with the red-blue-yellow motif of the company’s logo and the country’s flag. The airline’s aircraft have been blue on the inside for years. On older aircraft, the seat covers were medium light blue with leaf-shaped patterns in beige and faint orange. Its walls were grey, except for the front partitions facing passengers, which had silhouettes of palm trees.

“For the airline it was, ‘People know us for blue and so blue should be the predominant colour,’” says Baron. “If you’ve been using blue as your base colour for decades and you suddenly shift to orange or red you’ve got a lot of conservative business people who will prefer the safety of blue. But there are a lot of ways to finagle blue.”

How did he ‘finagle’? Baron ended up studying how numerous shades of blue would work alongside other



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colours. Two he knew to avoid were brown and purple: “In a country like the Philippines, which is humid, if you show a lot of brown, customers perceive it as dirty,” he says. “Purple is a colour they use for funerals.”

Baron proposed a blue-grey carpet with tiny orange and sky blue spots, slightly brighter than what the airline had in the past. In his office, in Tokyo, Baron opens a pine-coloured cabinet and pulls out a carpet sample the size of a hardback book cover. It’s a tad brighter than the pattern that the airline chose. He had intentionally proposed brighter hues because they create the illusion of space where there isn’t much, he says. Make the carpet too bright or too monochrome and it will show dirt and signs of wear too quickly. “If you have a plain colour it’s more likely to show heavy usage,” says Baron. “The tracks from the cart will eventually make a line. So the pattern of the carpet has to trick the eye.”

For the carpet material, Baron and PAL chose wool, providing consistency with the airline’s other long-haul

- 03. Economy-class curtains supplied by Lantal
- 04. 777-300ER economy cabin features 328 seats at 33-34in pitch
- 05. Business class sees a staggered 2-3-2 layout



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IT'S ABOUT THE TINY DETAILS: THE FABRIC, THE COLOUR, THE PATTERN – HOW TO BUILD THE 'WOW' INTO SOMETHING WITHOUT MAKING IT COST MORE



- 06. Two new 777-300ERs have joined PAL so far
- 07. PAL has also refreshed the lavatories with new sink tops and flooring

fleets. “To the average person, a carpet is a carpet,” he says. “You don’t really notice until you see the bad stuff.”

Variation throughout the cabin was key. For the business-class seats, Baron came up with a cross-hatched pattern of different shades of blue and beige stitching for the seat covers. Rather than use a repeating pattern that would look identical on every seat, he developed one with Botany Weaving, in Dublin, that would vary depending on where the bolts of cloth were cut. “It’s about the tiny details: the fabric, the colour, the pattern,” he says. “It’s also about how the customers perceive the cabin when they walk in, where you can build the ‘wow’ into something without making it cost more.”

He went with a more conventional pattern for the economy-class seats. They are blue-on-blue covers, with short, wavy lines running horizontally (supplied by rohi, Bavaria, Germany). Baron didn’t want the entire section to look the same – “like a cattle car” as he puts it. So he suggested alternating shades of light blue and violet for headrest covers, known among designers as a colour way. “It’s a method of breaking up the space,” he explains.

In the lavatories, PAL agreed on a cobalt granicoat sinktop from US supplier SAFAS and a burgundy-brown faux-wood floor made by Gerflor Transport Flooring. The debate there was between a matt or glossy finish. “Oily fingerprints are easy to see on the matt finish but water leaves marks on the gloss,” says Baron. Ultimately, Philippine Airlines opted for gloss.

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**COAST TO COAST** Something was needed to pull all the elements together. For that, Baron made a subtle decorative laminate pattern that he calls ‘coastlines’, which is applied to all cabin bulkheads. The asymmetrical wavy, vertical bands in four shades of light blue resemble the colours of the ocean as the sandy bottom goes from deep to shallow. The powder blue curtains, from Lantal in Switzerland, match the darkest shade of the laminate.

The whole project, from proposal to final management sign-off, took 13 months. Baron stresses that while a lot of thought went into the parts, the concept is more important. In future, if PAL wants to add more – say, a blanket or tray liner – the decorative laminate offers an obvious pattern to do that with. “I wanted to give the airline a concept that was expandable,” he says. ☒

CONTACT

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