



Only the very best

Emma Kelly reclines in the lap of luxury and explores the last word in helicopter interiors for the one per cent.

Luxury is to be found in each and every detail, according to French fashion designer Hubert de Givenchy.

Designers of VIP helicopter interiors have taken this philosophy to heart while also continuing to focus on ensuring functionality and efficiency.

From the use of plush and luxurious materials to the most comfortable seats and sleek interior lines, as well as the latest in connectivity and infotainment solutions, the world's VIP flyers can afford and get the very best available.

Luxury car interiors have long been an inspiration for VIP helicopter interiors, resulting in several partnerships between helicopter manufacturers and top-end car brands.

Airbus Corporate Helicopters (ACH) has partnered with Mercedes-Benz and Aston Martin on co-branded Edition designs for its helicopters.

The partnership with Mercedes-Benz dates back to 2010, with a Mercedes-

Benz Style EC145, later the ACH145.

Inspired by Mercedes-Benz car design, the interior is offered in three variants. Customers can further personalise their aircraft, working with Airbus and the creative design team at Mercedes-Benz Style to define a unique cabin environment to meet their every need.

Some 20 of this co-branded Edition designs have been sold to date. The partners have recently renewed their brand collaboration and “are currently looking at the next step for this Edition”, says ACH.

Signature elements

In 2020, ACH teamed up with Aston Martin to launch the ACH130 Aston Martin Edition. The partnership resulted in four external liveries with complementary interiors – a Stirling Green external scheme which fades down into Jet Black on the underside and Skyfall Silver around the cowlings; Xenon Grey; Arizona; and Ultramarine Black.

Inside, the helicopter is trimmed in Pure Black ultra-suede with a palette of leathers to choose from, including Oxford Tan, Pure Black, Cormorant and Ivory.

The design features Aston Martin signature elements, including the wing emblem embossed on leather features and positioned throughout the cabin. The doors are also trimmed with leather to provide passengers with comfortable touchpoints during their flight, says ACH.

The partnership has proved “extremely successful”, says ACH, with ACH and Aston Martin last year agreeing to produce another 15 ACH130 Aston Martin Edition helicopters, with the initial production run of 15 selling out faster than anticipated.

Some 18 have now been sold to customers in South East Asia, Europe, Latin America, New Zealand and North America.

With the ongoing success, at Heli-Expo in Atlanta, Georgia, in March, ACH launched a new range of external liveries and cabin interiors for the ACH130 Aston Martin Edition, comprising a timeless grey, dark crimson and distinctive green.

“The Aston Martin Edition is unique to the ACH130 because the concept was designed to attract the kind of pilot owner who might enjoy driving a supercar and also favour the thrill of

Airbus Corporate Helicopters has partnered with carmaker Aston Martin on co-branded Edition designs of its aircraft.



piloting an agile and high-performance single, such as the ACH130,” says ACH.

The ACH145 Mercedes-Benz Style Edition, meanwhile, “capitalises on the design aspects of an ‘all-road’ luxury SUV in clear reference to the ACH motto ‘Arrive Anywhere;’” the manufacturer adds.

Further Edition developments are likely. “The Editions are an integral part of our offering. We pioneered it and it has proved very successful for us so we will certainly continue to develop it to offer premium products. This can take various forms, such as co-branded products and design collaboration, but not only.”

Design collaborations

ACH has a design collaboration with superyacht and aviation designer Harrison Eidsgaard, which resulted in ACH-branded interiors being designed in conjunction with the manufacturer’s creative design team for the ACH175 and ACH160 Exclusive interiors. The Exclusive provides ACH’s highest level of interior customisation.

The manufacturer says its ACH-labelled cabins are increasingly popular “to the point that we see some completion centres getting inspired or simply following in our footsteps. This popularity illustrates our distinctive brand approach to style and quality.”

The proportion of customers opting for green aircraft is decreasing as awareness of the “refined” ACH-labelled cabin offering increases.

“We pride ourselves on being able to satisfy every customer and, in principle, we can supply a fully bespoke interior designed by the customer or his/her designer in collaboration with our creative design team,” ACH says.

Fractional ownership specialist Flexjet has also looked to luxury cars for design inspiration. The company launched a private helicopter division last year, integrating Associated Aircraft Group and its Sikorsky S-76 fleet.

The Flexjet-branded helicopters are providing last-mile transport for owners of Flexjet aircraft, travelling from airports to their final destinations in a door-to-door travel solution.

Last August, Flexjet unveiled one of its S-76s featuring an LXi Cabin Collection Interior inspired by the Bentley Mulliner Bacalar sports car, of which only 12 were ever produced to the specifications of each buyer.

Flexjet has also equipped one of its Gulfstream G650s with the same interior. Only one of its S-76s features the interior, with its other Red Label helicopters featuring the Phantom interior.

Artistic licence: the interior of the ACH145 Mercedes-Benz Style Edition capitalises on the design aspects of an ‘all-road’ luxury SUV.





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Flexjet's other Red Label helicopters, such as this, have been fitted out by a fractional ownership specialist who has recently fitted out

Bespoke personalisation

Flexjet owner and Bentley customer Kenn Ricci wanted to apply the bespoke personalisation he is used to with his luxury car to his aircraft. Ricci worked with Mulliner Design to create the two bespoke personalised aircraft, inspired by the design of his own Bentley Bacalar.

The Bacalar helicopter interior features wood veneer inspired by the 5,000-year-old Riverwood that forms the wraparound dashboard on the sports car; a silver-green chameleon paint livery rather than Flexjet's normal red-gold chameleon inspired by the rare Bacalar paint colour option of Julep; satin Bacalar Bronze fittings and diamond carved carpets; while the copperhead shape and basketweave stitching on the white leather and black trimmed seats of the sports car inspired the custom seats

on the aircraft which are trimmed in Beluga and Linen leather.

"The market has certainly recognised what we are striving to deliver and responded, which is encouraging," says Eli Flint, President of Flexjet's helicopter division. "Our customers are sophisticated, seasoned private fliers with high expectations for the helicopters, seeking a similar onboard experience to our jets. Materials are complementary and varied, to make the flight memorable and the environment luxurious."

Flint points, for example, to the interior's redesigned door liners and magazine racks, reconfigured seating and drawers and the installation of sound insulation for increased ergonomics. As a result, he says, the S-76's cocoon cabin features a noticeably quieter, lower vibration ride

compared with other helicopters.

Interior developments will not end there as "additional creative projects are under way as we grow the fleet", says Flint.

"Our creative team is never satisfied. A new design is currently forming up – and you could see another Bacalar-inspired theme."

House styles

Helicopter manufacturers have also drawn inspiration from luxury fashion design houses, with the then AgustaWestland (now Leonardo) previously partnering with Karl Lagerfeld on limited edition designs for the AW139; Versace for the AW109 Power, Grand and the AW139; and Italian fashion design house Trussardi for the A109.

Last year, Leonardo announced that it

Sustainability taking centre stage

With developments in sustainable materials, the industry is not too far away from a helicopter interior that is entirely made from bio-sourced materials, predicts Robin Dunlop, founding partner at UK-based cabin design and completion specialist Altea.

Companies such as Altea have an important role to play in driving this.

"As designers and technologists, we feel we can educate the customer on the latest trends and developments, such as more sustainable materials," says Dunlop.

"On this subject, we feel pretty much at the cutting edge. A lot of suppliers previously focused on décor materials that give a nod to sustainability and, of course, every bit we can do is important.

However, more recently we have seen advanced sustainable materials for substrate structure materials."

More testing is required for these materials, but Dunlop says "the supply chain is best placed for these bite-size developments, harnessing their specific knowledge and research will cumulate in an overall bigger impact."



Sikorsky S-76, feature the Phantom interior. The interior of its Gulfstream G650s with the Bacalar interior.

would be returning to its Agusta roots for its VIP helicopter brand, leveraging the heritage of an iconic name and combining best in class performance, comfort and “refined Italian style”. The

manufacturer subsequently launched a range of new interior solutions.

The new Interior Moods layouts, which have initially been developed for the AW169, AW139 and AW189, are inspired by three cities – Florence, London and New York.

The Florence design features a sense of warmth, harmony and pureness; London highlights the co-existence of opposites like tradition and innovation; and New York represents “energy and passion”.

Leonardo says: “Our Interior Moods are intended to allow customers to select and create their ideal and perfect habitat which can best mirror their personality and meet their expectations starting from an inspirational mood board. A lot of customers are asking to have new Moods inspired by their cities and we are working on the opportunity to

enlarge the offering. Currently the most popular one is Firenze and its soft contrast tone.”

Bell also has a new Designer Series interior for the Bell 429. This features high-quality leather; enhanced flooring, with hardwood and carpet options; improved seat tailoring that is removable; metal finishes on lights, air valves, cabin handles and door latches; pictorial placards for enhanced aesthetics; and sturdier assist handles for ingress/egress, and headset jack bezels to improve the look and operation of passenger headsets.

The Designer Series is offered in three coordinated colour schemes that were created in-house, with the first two Bell 429s having been delivered to New Zealand helicopter charter and management company Advanced Flight earlier this year.

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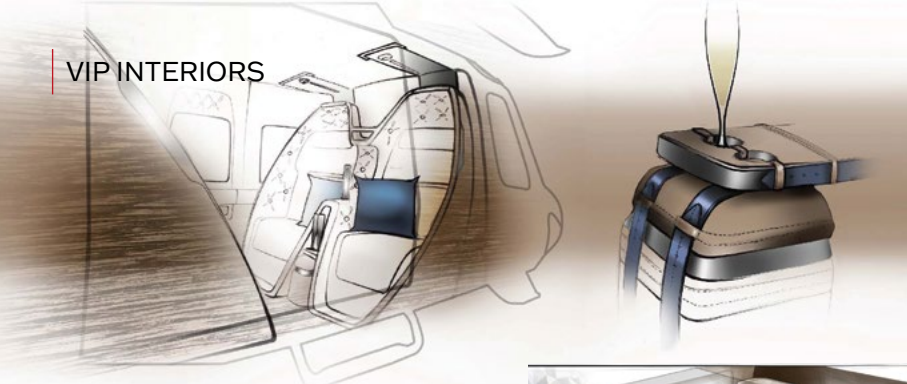
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Home from home: Altea says its focus is on improving features such as connectivity, acoustics, maintenance and reliability. Photos: CTM Design

Meeting the brief

Design houses and completion specialists work closely with their clients to understand their requirements and design an interior that fully meets the brief.

For UK company Altea, helicopter interior design and completion is a relatively small part of its business, but a very important one.

Founding partner Robin Dunlop tells *RotorHub International*: "Helicopters are entry level machines with particular versatility, so we best pay attention to getting an owner's requirements absolutely on point. We always want the customers to return to us."

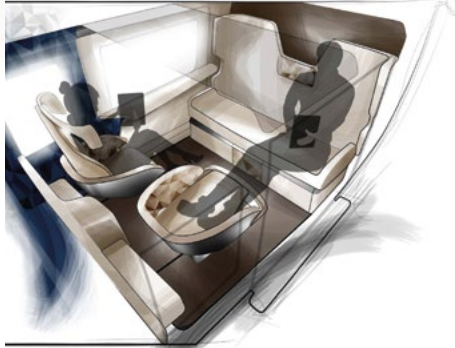
Altea's service fits in with the normal serial production of the helicopter, depending on the size and complexity of the project, with Altea offering a complete customised service.

"We carefully review the customer's schedule requirements and look to dovetail our services into the serial production," says Dunlop. "What this means is the customer should expect little to no extension to their expected delivery date with a custom interior."

For refurbishment projects, either for a pre-owned machine or a refresh to coincide with maintenance downtime, Dunlop advises the customer to talk to Altea early in the planning phase – at least six months in advance of the maintenance input.

"Our services range from advising and overseeing particular maintenance inputs to pre-purchase inspections and seeking the right pre-owned machine on behalf of the customer," he says.

"The custom/bespoke aspects and requirements can then all be factored in.



It might be we can find a machine very close to the customer's requirements allowing for a light cabin refresh.

"Generally, customers have an idea of what they want or they might come with a trusted designer. Altea's specialism is really developing the seed of an idea into manufacturable hardware."

The company can advise on current style trends and the latest materials for interior décor. It also provides advice on new technology for advancing the comfort and functionality of the interior, such as noise-cancelling technology and connectivity solutions.

"So once you are in the helicopter everything works, connects, feels homely and intuitive," says Dunlop.

In terms of technology, Dunlop says Altea is focused on improving the basics, such as connectivity, acoustics, maintenance and reliability.

"If you can package that all into an aesthetic, stylish, bespoke flying cocoon, then you have delivered what the customer really wants. We are not there yet for noise cancellation and connectivity challenges, but small steps are being made and overall, every step forward is a development on previous cabins."

He adds: "Altea concentrates on all the details of cabin integration and exterior presence so the customer can enjoy not only the final flying experience but the whole project development and ownership." ■

Vegan interior ... no problem

Almost anything is possible when it comes to meeting customers' interior requests for Airbus Corporate Helicopters, including matching customers' ethical needs.

When one of its customers requested a vegan interior for its ACH145, for example, ACH's design team was happy to meet the brief.

German construction entrepreneur Dr Urs Brunner requested a vegan interior to meet the wishes of his wife, ethical fashion designer Daniela Brunner, the founder of Giulia & Romeo, which designs and produces 100% vegan clothing.

As a result, it was important that materials used on the Brunners' ACH145 interior were as vegan as possible.

ACH responded with the clean and modern ACH Line interior configuration in a grey theme, replacing traditional leather elements with Ultraleather, which the manufacturer says captures the visual and tactile leather experience with comparable durability.

Ultraleather replaced leather on the six passenger seats, central storage cabinet, rear partition and cockpit control cuffs.

Unlike traditional leather, Ultraleather can only be stretched in one direction, which made its use particularly challenging on the seats.

