



Prestige, personalisation and exceptional quality are what helicopter VIP interiors are all about. While OEMs may claim that they can cater to this market, it's best left to specialists like Altea to do the work, as **Glenn Sands** discovers.

Real COOL cabins

If you have the money, the acquisition of your own helicopter is likely to be high on your list of priorities, after the mansion and the yacht.

For those lucky enough to be in this position, optional OEM cabin interiors simply won't cut it. Despite the recent rise in specialist interior departments within Airbus Helicopters, Leonardo and Bell, there's still the demand from ever-discerning high-end clients for something special and exclusive. This is where the London-based design

experts of aviation consultancy Altea are meeting the challenge within the VIP helicopter market.

Despite what those on the outside might expect, given the devastating impact that COVID-19 has had across the aviation industry over the last 18 months, Altea has seen its workload remain fairly steady during this period, according to Andrew Butler, its co-founder and partner.

"We obviously can't discuss the VIP helicopter market without mentioning the

dreaded impact of COVID-19, it's simply not possible, and it has impacted the market to an extent," he acknowledges. "We all know most of these machines are at the end of the spectrum for many of these customers. They may well have travelled long haul, and they pick up their helicopter at the other end, and the very fact that they can't get to other locations because of restrictions has meant that their helicopters aren't flying. This has been particularly the case in the upper end of the VIP/VVIP market.



Robin Dunlop (left) and Andrew Butler, two of Altea's co-founders and partners.

So, while there has been a lull in flying, the Altea team is confident that new business opportunities are just around the corner. "I think you've got to take into account the fact that there's a lot of pent-up demand in the sense that the wealthy haven't been able to spend their money as they used to, certainly over the last 18 months, and that's all set to change," Butler says.

Leading the way

"I see a lot of change in the market as it reopens, and this will likely take place in the US first, where things tend to open up more quickly. Their domestic market can pretty much do what it wants, compared to the rest of the world. Things just seem to happen far quicker over there. It's a trend that we have seen within our fixed-wing work also, so the helicopter side will likely follow suit. It's the US that tends to lead the market, with Europe lagging around six to eight months behind," he explains.

Robin Dunlop, another Altea co-founder and partner, supports Butler's view. "The trend we have seen is new fixed-wing owners coming on to the market, which then trickles down into the rotary side. The restrictions showed people that there are ways, if you have the means, of getting around the world safely if you want to. So, as Andrew said, the rich have got richer, and the opportunity is now there to travel in a far safer manner in their eyes, and not with the masses.

"New owners are making enquiries within the rotary side already. One thing that we have found, particularly with the helicopter VVIP market, is its link to the yachting world. With fewer yacht charters and less usage by owners, there was a drop-off in helicopter flights connected to this. As

restrictions are now easing, these 'toys' will get a bit more use again. I think we'll see clients upgrading their helicopters at the same time, in some cases."

However, the process of acquiring a new helicopter is similar to purchasing a new car in some respects. The more money you have to spend, the more options there are to choose from, which can make the process seem daunting.

For those not entirely sure what model may suit their needs best, Altea can provide the necessary assistance from the outset, taking into consideration the client's personal requirements, how they intend to use the helicopter, the distances they are expecting to cover and whether the aircraft will be more of a personal taxi or a business-focused tool.

Dunlop admits that dealing with high-end clients and meeting their very specific requirements can be a long and challenging process, and it can take 12 months or more to progress from the initial discussions to the completion of a helicopter with a tailored interior.

Butler explains how the process works. "Once we have the type of helicopter identified, and we know the delivery output from the manufacturer and when we'll be able to get to it to install our interior, then the process can really begin. If a client wants a VVIP interior, we'll begin looking at this very early on. As mentioned, it's all about how they are intending to use the helicopter, and if this will have any influence on the interior design."

OEM limitations

Dunlop takes up the story. "It rests on the owner, their wishes and the size of the platform, which all play a part in the design process. Sometimes there's a limited amount of customisation that we can put into the platform, and other times we have virtually a clean-sheet design. It depends on what the client is wanting to achieve, which can also impact the scheduling. But 12 months is an ideal timeline for us.

"What has to be remembered with the helicopter market is there are limited choices, particularly in terms of customisation. I liken it to the luxury car market, in so far as the manufacturers like to portray that they offer a fairly high level of customisation to you, but, at the end of ▶

An Altea design concept for the H160. (All images: Altea)

"So this has been an immediate consequence of the pandemic, but as the restrictions come down, we'll start to see the market come back to where it was before," he says.

"Of course, there's still helicopter chartering from A to B – that's always the case within a domestic market. But it's the high-end customers who have just completed a long-haul flight and have their helicopter for the final transit at the end that have dropped off.

"This will, of course, change as the world starts to open up again," he states. "I predict that many people who can afford their own helicopter will acquire one or seek a newer model. It's what we here at Altea are looking forward to."

INTERIORS



Altea came up with the exterior and interior design of this AW109 GrandNew for a South American client.

the day, makes like Mercedes, Rolls-Royce and Bentley only have a predetermined selection of materials and configurations that they would like you to follow. This then allows them to slot the vehicle into their production line so that they can keep to their timelines and output targets.

“Here is the frustration for owners, new or old, as their wishes or requirements are not always able to be slotted into what an OEM can offer,” he points out. “It can become a dialogue of frustration between the two parties. An OEM can explain to their client that this is the selection of leathers available, as they have tested them and they meet all the necessary compliance regulations, but they may simply not be what the customer desires.

“This is where Altea can step in and assist a customer who wants a complete customised helicopter interior, which can

include everything from the shape of the seats to the configuration of the cabin,” Dunlop explains. “What has to be kept in mind is that a helicopter is fairly limited in space, but clients still want to maximise that area and perhaps include additional requirements that are outside what the OEMs can offer.

“Add-ons can include architectural lighting features and touchscreen technologies. We explore these second-tier suppliers which can encounter mild resistance from the OEMs. I can understand why.

“With the bigger OEMs, they may well have invested time and money into cabin development, including new technologies, but the high-end customer is requesting something far more exclusive. When I say technologies, particularly in helicopters, it can revolve around things such as deadening the noise, so passengers don’t

have to wear headphones like they did in the past.

“For an OEM, they may find that they’re completing just one or two bespoke-style cabins a year, which doesn’t make the profit margins viable. At Altea, we can oversee the entire process and can actively engage with both sides, in terms of what the customer wants and where the OEM can help with their line products.

“Of course, there can be a little resistance from both parties, and it can be a delicate balancing act,” Dunlop acknowledges. “We have to be available to slot ourselves into the OEM’s production process and timelines, and those of outside suppliers. It can present some real challenges, but we have to keep the focus on the ambitions of the customer at heart, so we come up with the solutions.”

Project management

Butler echoes Dunlop’s comments. “I think it’s important to say that once the design is frozen and we’ve overcome those initial early obstacles, because the OEM will always throw some in the way during this process, we then look at the technical aspects involved.”

Michael Hoby Andersen, who handles technical support and customer representation for Altea, explains the next stage in the process. “It’s quite important to focus on the customer’s demands, so we represent them and maintain guardianship of the project when dealing with the OEM. I have to put my mind into Robin’s head and

From concept to completion: Altea’s interior for the AW109 GrandNew.



ensure that the design is feasible and all the features that have been requested can be incorporated.”

With an interior and design set in place, it's a case of Altea monitoring the manufacturer's production line to keep track of the helicopter through the build process. “It depends on the OEM in terms of how and when they can allow us access to the airframe, but, of course, we monitor its progress throughout,” he says. “We're not constantly on site with the OEM, but will step in when there are key stages we need to focus on and look at.”

Altea's cabin designs for its clients are unique, but they reflect some of the developing trends within the VIP interiors market. “The trends are changing, particularly with the technology,” Andersen reports. “Everything is getting quicker, lighter, and we can now integrate this with different materials, which can offer a complete IFE system. The iPad has more or less become integrated with the helicopter's systems, allowing the client to control everything in the rear cabin.”

“There's also been a push to reduce the noise level in the cabin, and there have been some changes in sound insulation, where it's much better than it was, but this comes with the addition of weight, which can impact the design changes we'd like to incorporate. The way to think of it is ‘if we do X, what happens to Y?’ – such as the space lost or weight penalty. With the best will in the world, it's a compromise.”

Great expectations

Dunlop adds his thoughts on developments in cabin technology. “In terms of whether there have been significant changes in the last four years, I'd honestly say not a lot. What has become noteworthy is our ability to integrate systems.”

“We know the technology is always lagging, simply because it has to go through regulatory compliance and testing. And here there needs to be a balance between customer expectations and what's possible. A client might well say: ‘I have a half-inch-thick television in my lounge. Why can't I have something similar in my helicopter?’ It's about having the ability to explain that option may not be possible.

“Customers' expectations are ahead of us all the time, and they often desire

something that may not have completed its FAA or CAA certification process,” he notes.

“Another issue with introducing new technology is that it's a good opportunity for OEMs to offer their new models to the market. Often, the emerging tech simply won't integrate with older helicopters. This does raise some potential issues with pre-owned VIP helicopters at present.

“But as we've alluded to, it's a delicate balancing act which Altea has mastered over the years,” Dunlop emphasises.

OEMs such as Bell, Leonardo and Airbus Helicopters have been keen to develop their own VIP interior packages, so they can slot these into their production line schedule. When a customer has selected Altea to provide the interior, the company will be looking to discuss the project with the OEM up to 12 months before the helicopter is completed, which is an ideal timeline, although this depends on whether the OEM is willing to engage with a second-tier contractor that early in the process.

In some cases, Altea will become involved with six months to go, but it has to keep in mind its own supply chain, and schedules can become difficult when lead times are compressed. Altea may also be undertaking multiple projects at the same time, including fixed-wing conversions across the globe.



Another Altea concept, this one for the Bell 429 helicopter.

Along with its design services, the company is able to offer additional help to its clients by organising the acquisition of the helicopter and technical oversight of the process through to delivery of the aircraft. Its most recent delivery was a Leonardo helicopter for a client in South America. The OEM did not have a support mechanism in place within the country in question, so the customer turned to Altea for help.

The phrase ‘you get what you pay for’ is certainly the case in the VVIP helicopter market. For those fortunate enough to be in a position to buy themselves such a helicopter, an interior designed by Altea is simply the icing on the cake. ■

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