

pleasurezone

Airport lounges are evolving as the need to improve the passenger experience gains importance. We take a closer look at some of the key trends emerging from the latest developments around the world

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01. The Air France business lounge at Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport is inspired by garden designs. Photo courtesy of Air France



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THE PARIS LOUNGE WAS A GIMMICK –
ALTHOUGH DOUBTLESS WELCOME



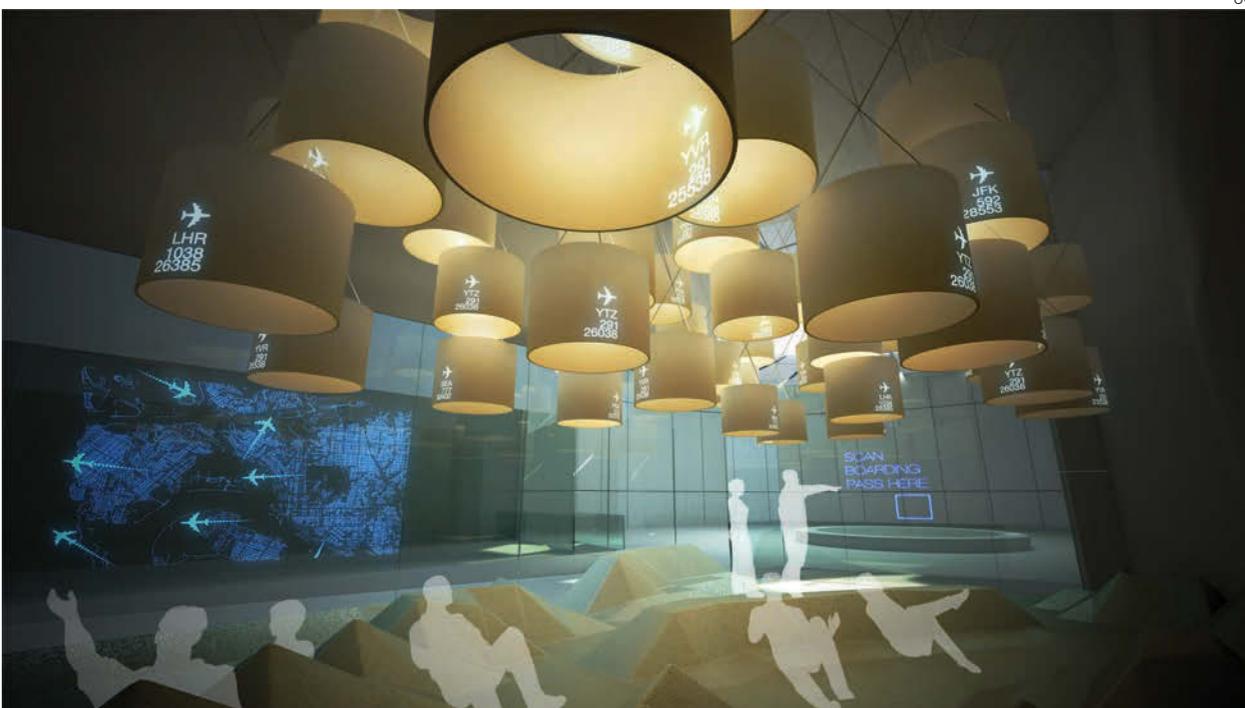
The executive lounge has long been a privilege that only passengers with business or first class tickets have enjoyed, but it is changing beyond all recognition. Where once such lounges traded solely on their exclusivity, with fairly minimal facilities, they are now places where travellers can meet, work, eat, chill and sleep. At the same time, new types of lounges are becoming available to a growing number of passengers.

LOUNGES FOR ALL For three weeks during summer 2012, travellers through Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport were able to do something that most budget travellers can only dream of – relax in an executive lounge. Swedish furniture company IKEA created a promotional lounge, which was open to all passengers, with one of the pleasures on offer being to relax on an IKEA mattress. Although the space did not offer the full facilities of a top-class lounge, it did share at least some of the characteristics.

There was a hostess to greet visitors (and presumably regulate numbers rather than, as is normal, keep out those without the correct ticket type). And there was a range of spaces for various activities. The 220m² lounge included comfortable seating, televisions and nine bedrooms where passengers could sleep before their flights. There was also a children's play area with several qualified assistants.

The Paris lounge was a gimmick – although doubtless a welcome one. Similarly, the three specially designed Suvanto lounges at Helsinki Airport, also open to all, were created as part of the city's role as World Design Capital

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- 02. Even if you hate shopping, the IKEA lounge in Paris would be a tempting proposition
- 03. Relax on a sofa and watch TV. If you like the sofa, you could arrange for the same model to be delivered to your home when you return from your trip
- 04. Jason Bruges' vision for a lounge in San Diego centres around lighting

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in 2012, but with an aspiration for them to continue afterwards. These lounges showcased furniture by Finnish designers and had specially designed places for recharging electronic devices.

These temporary interventions represent a larger trend. Private lounges, which were once the sole preserve of premium ticket holders, are now becoming available to more travellers. Jason Bruges Studio, mainly known as a lighting designer but also involved in all sorts of installations and interiors, won a competition in October 2012 to design a lounge for San Diego International Airport that will open soon. The New Media Lounge will be open to all and will be a permanent fixture. The space will be all about relaxation, with seating that seemingly rises out of the ground, referencing

more is more

Once upon a time a cup of tea and a complimentary biscuit were enough to make a lounge passenger feel cherished – but those days are long gone. As airlines compete for business and first class passengers, so there is a desire to offer more at the airport to attract repeat business. Pat Askew, senior associate for aviation and transportation at Gensler says, “It’s the airlines’ investment and attempt to differentiate themselves. They really focus on the passenger experience, which starts at check-in.” Lounges are a key part but only part of a cossetting experience, which starts with dedicated check-in areas.

There is an increasing desire not only for full business facilities, but for facilities that people can use over extended stays – or even when they do not leave the airport at all. James Park, founder of JPA Design says that not only may transfer passengers want to use their time profitably during long waits between flights, but some passengers may not venture landside at all. Instead, flying in from different parts of the world, they may hold meetings in the lounge.

This requirement is leading to the growth of meeting rooms at airports. Askew says, “Meeting rooms and conference spaces are always part of our programme.” Airports such as Incheon in Seoul, Korea, are gaining importance on the international circuit by the quality of conference facilities they offer.

But also, says Park, “If you have been travelling for two or three days, it is incredibly important to be pampered.” As a result, spas are becoming more ambitious, and massage in particular is becoming essential. A generously sized lounge will also be popular because it will offer more space to walk around after the cramped conditions of the aircraft. The one aspect of fitness and leisure not on offer is a gym, because the need to bring workout clothing makes it too much of an effort for passengers.

The other thing passengers may want to do is sleep, if they are staying for several hours. Loungers are fine for a quick doze, but increasingly lounges are installing bedrooms. In China, says Park, with the long distances and many internal transfers, this is becoming important, and his practice is including bedrooms in its offering for Air China.

But however good the lounge, it is still within the sterile surroundings of an airport. A few airports do have external areas, and the new Queen Alia International Airport in Jordan has built gardens next to its lounges. This contact with nature could prove the most impressive regenerator of all.

the nearby rocky scenery – but far more comfortable. Large lamps will hang from the ceiling with flight information relevant to each passenger projected on to the shades. The lounge will be a non-commercial environment where passengers will be able to scan their boarding passes, recharge mobile devices and ‘interact’ with the room, with experiences related to local wildlife and the theme of migration.

THE PAY-TO-USE LOUNGE These days passengers who want the full lounge experience still have to pay for it, but they may not need to buy an expensive air ticket in order to do so. Pay-to-use lounges are now nearly ubiquitous. The idea was pioneered by Plaza Premium Lounge Management, which opened its first lounge at

05. The Plaza Premium bar area in Hong Kong International Airport

food for thought

If lounges are in competition with each other, then one of the ways they can differentiate themselves is through catering and, not surprisingly, their offerings are becoming more ambitious. Virgin's Newark Clubhouse (pictured right), for example, makes a virtue of serving locally sourced food, and at Plaza Premium's lounge at Toronto Pearson there is not only an all-day continental buffet but also a noodle bar.

The sophistication of the offering often involves a certain sleight of hand since, says James Park of JPA Design, the kitchen units are generally compact and the food is usually brought in ready prepared. Lounges are paying rent for the space and want to optimise the number of people who can use it, not fill up the space with back of house.

This means that, while offerings are generous and increasingly sophisticated, they are unlikely to compete with the gourmet restaurants appearing in airports. If a traveller's primary ambition is to eat and drink at the highest level, then such restaurants are likely to attract them. But if they want to relax, maybe work, and eat in congenial surroundings (and without paying for it), then the offerings of the newest lounges should satisfy most tastes.



06. Virgin Atlantic has invested heavily in its lounges, as shown in the airline's latest opening at Newark

Hong Kong International Airport in 1998 and now has its first arrivals lounge there. Currently it runs 90 lounges at 23 airports, mostly in the Far East, Canada and the Middle East. "Last year we served around four million passengers in our lounges, and we are rapidly expanding," says founder and CEO of Plaza Premium Lounge Management, Song Hoi See.

Access to the lounge is by a one-off payment or a membership card, and in some airports these lounges also serve airlines that do not have their own dedicated lounges.

Plaza's latest, at Toronto Pearson International Airport, has been designed by Hong Kong designer Kinney Chan in a colour palette of browns and beiges. This is far more than merely functional, with a specially designed reception chandelier, a mother-of-pearl reception desk and club

armchairs. It offers full wi-fi access, a meeting room and the all-important shower room.

"I believe that the measure of a good lounge is based on a balance of service, food and facilities," says Song. "We continuously implement innovative features into our lounges. For example, all our recently opened lounges demonstrate our fourth-generation concept, which is all about adding a human touch. With technology advancing, I sometimes feel that we are losing personal interaction. This is the same in airport lounges; they become mechanical and almost everything is self-service.

"We have consciously moved away from this and introduced an interactive approach to our lounges where travellers can expect a personalised service from our team. For example, we provide made-to-order Hong Kong-style fish ball noodles at the noodle bar and we have a barista-manned coffee and wine bar."

Airport Lounge Development is a USA-based lounge company. If some of its lounges seem indistinguishable from airline lounges, it is because some of them actually are airline lounges. In some airports the airlines only use their lounges for part of the day, and ALD will lease them for paying users for the rest of the time. In others, several small airlines can share the use of a lounge.

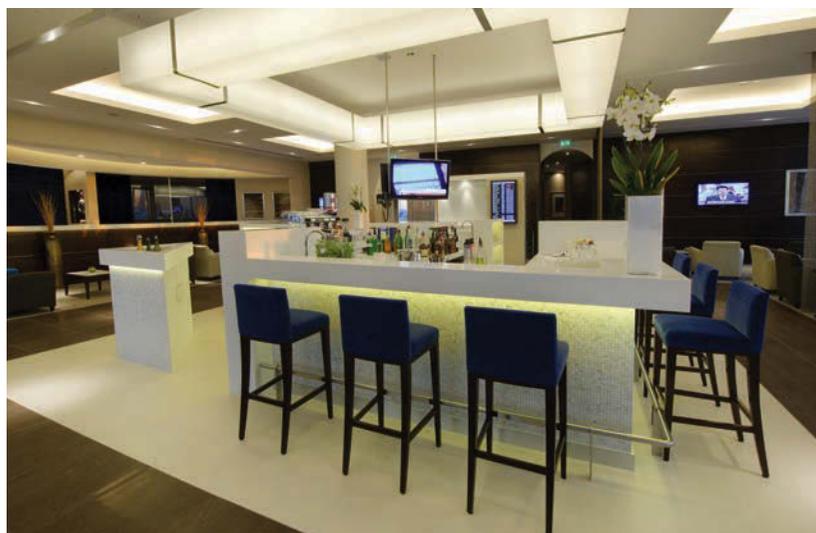
Typical 'dwell times' range, according to ALD, from half an hour to around a couple of hours if a flight is delayed. The fact that people will pay to spend as little as 30 minutes in a lounge – many users head straight there after security, says ALD – is an indication of how important it is to some people to get out of the hurly-burly. This may be because they need to draw breath during a busy travelling schedule, or because they need to get on with some work in comfortable surroundings. Easily accessible wi-fi and a desk on which to put a laptop are hugely preferable to crouching with the machine on your lap and an uncertain connection in a general seating area.

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THE UPMARKET HOTEL It is not surprising that many lounges have a great deal in common with smart hotel chains. After all, the clientele are largely the same, and many passengers will either be coming from or going to a hotel. If lounge design is about removing stress from these most cosseted passengers, then giving them surroundings with which they are familiar is a good way of doing so.

James Park, founder of JPA Design, for whom lounges represent a pleasing marriage of his practice's work on hotels and aircraft interiors, says, "The airlines want to extend their brand into the lounge – to exercise their aesthetic. There is often a connection with cabins in terms of the decorative treatment."

JPA is currently designing lounges for Air China, both detailing individual lounges and creating a template that it can roll out to other airports. "Air China is very keen to project an international image," Park says, "while maintaining clear Chinese references."

Similarly, the practice's first and business class lounges for Oman Air at Muscat Airport marry international luxury with a subtle Middle Eastern style. In contrast, the Gulf Air Premium lounge at London Heathrow is far more neutral – a recognition that the airline is not on its home turf.

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The Muscat lounge includes men's and women's prayer rooms, a reflection of a particular cultural requirement. But in general terms, all lounges offer the same facilities. They have spaces to work, and surprisingly still offer desks with computers. Apparently, says Park, there are still many travellers without their own laptops who want to use these facilities. There are spaces to eat and drink. There are showers and increasingly spas, or at the very least the opportunity to have a neck and shoulder massage. Access to electronic information and the ability to plug-in and charge devices are vital. But so is a quiet space where the use of electronic devices is not permitted.

THE FUNKY LOUNGE Virgin Atlantic is the airline that has done the most to break the traditional image of the

- 07. Stylish dining at Oman Air's business lounge in Muscat
- 08. The Gulf Air lounge in Heathrow Terminal 4
- 09. Oman Air's Muscat lounges offer a subtle Middle Eastern aesthetic



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WHILE OTHER COMPANIES STRIVE TO BE INOFFENSIVE, VERGING ON BLAND, VIRGIN HAS A REBELLIOUS ATMOSPHERE



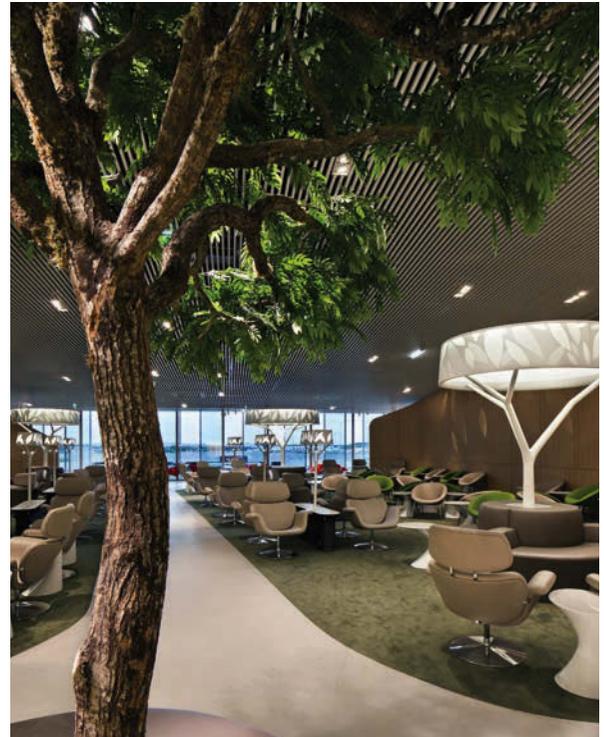
- 10. Air France leads business passengers down the garden path at Charles de Gaulle
- 11. Virgin Atlantic's 'uptown' styled lounge at JFK
- 12. The Virgin entertainment zone at JFK is dominated by a striking flame-red ball sofa

executive lounge. While other companies strive to be inoffensive, verging on bland, Virgin has a slightly rebellious atmosphere as an airline, which is also apparent in its lounges. This is reflected not so much in the facilities it offers – although comprehensive, they are not radical – but in the way they are presented, and in particular in the design.

This starts with the naming. If you are a Virgin Upper Class or Gold Card passenger, you don't go to a lounge but to a 'clubhouse'. The first of these was built at London Gatwick Airport in 1998, but was given a thorough overhaul in 2009 including the addition of a Cowshed spa (Cowshed is a supplier of luxurious bodycare products, so there was glamour by association).

The other London clubhouse is at Heathrow. It opened in 2006 and was designed by young British architectural practice Softroom, and also incorporates a Cowshed spa. More recent are the clubhouses at the other end of the route. The one at JFK opened in spring 2012 and was designed by New York practice Slade Architecture with a deliberately 'uptown' feel. Even more recent, and designed by the same team, is the clubhouse at Newark, which demonstrates its self-indulgent side with a cocktail bar and 'liquid lounge'.

There are other lounges that break the mould. Helsinki Airport's Aspire Lounge, free to loyalty cardholders and available at a fee to others, uses bright colours to give a modern feel, and offers carefully considered resilient flooring to soothe tired feet. In contrast, the airport's



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almost@home lounge showcases the elegant but relaxed interiors for which the country is famous, moving away from the corporate feel to one that is far more domestic.

Another lounge with a very strong design identity is the Air France business lounge at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris. Eschewing any direct design links with the airline or the country, this is a very cool space, apparently modelled on a garden by Brandimage and Noé Duchaufour-Lawrance. While some tree-like forms are evident, the strongest impression is of whiteness and curvaceous forms. Again it follows the orthodoxy of having a number of interlinked but distinctive spaces. But though many lounges are modelled on luxury hotel brands, this is more akin to the boutique hotel. And while not specifically French, it exudes a relaxed chic, a *je ne sais quoi* that is perhaps quintessentially Parisian. ☒

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