

The future of first class? Priestman Goode's vision for its high-speed train concept, the Mercury

Sir Nicholas Winterton made national headlines when he complained that he and fellow British MPs were no longer able to claim for first-class rail travel. Winterton, no stranger to controversy, had sailed straight into the eye of a perfect storm: a powerful blend of public disgust over MP's expenses and a growing realisation that, in light of the economic gloom, years of austerity and belt-tightening lay ahead.

To cut costs, both the public and private sectors in the UK have targeted first-class rail travel. In May the government announced a clamp down on first class for all civil servants, the BBC does not allow it for journeys under four hours, and British Telecom decrees standard class for all UK rail use.

This is not just a PR stunt – businesses have to save money. One former senior executive with a rail operator says: "People who use first class are predominantly business travellers and, having worked in a business that operated first class through one recession and out of the other side, I've seen you get a degree of downgrading."

This necessarily exerts pressure on first-class rail travel. The government estimates its own ban on first-class travel will reduce demand for the service by some £10 million alone.

#### Mind the gap

A further threat comes from a better standard class, making it harder to differentiate first class from standard. Gerald Khoo, rail analyst with Arbutnot Securities, says: "There are services available in standard, such as WiFi, which not too long ago would have been regarded as premium. The industry will have to become ever more innovative in finding ways to differentiate its first-class product."

Perhaps some have already given up the struggle. When Southeastern introduced new Hitachi Class 395s on High Speed 1 between St Pancras and Ashford International in December last year, it did not even include first class. "The trains are extremely comfortable anyway," says spokesman Jon Hay-Campbell. "You could almost say that the whole train is first class in terms of seating and absolutely in terms of the time saving you get. That's not to say that in the future we might not start to introduce first class, but we don't have any plans at the moment."

# First option

What's the future for first-class rail travel? Experts agree a more flexible approach is key to answering passenger demands for privacy, space, comfort and a place to work



ABOVE: East Coast Main Line First Class

He argues that the Hitachi Class 395 High Speed 1 option can be regarded as a third alternative to first and standard class on the normal mainline service. The tickets are priced accordingly with a standard class mainline return of £40.60 against a first-class fare of £67.80 and high speed at £48.70.

**Numbers game**

Of course High Speed 1 between St Pancras and Ashford is a commuter route – for long-distance routes, it seems reports of the imminent demise of first class have been greatly exaggerated.

Neal Smith, head of communications for East Coast Main Line, says: “We’re working very hard to respond to our customers’ demands – this included making improvements to our first-class offer within weeks of taking over the railway in November last year. We want more people to travel first class and, as a long-distance operator, believe there is a huge potential in encouraging more people to travel by train.”



MAIN IMAGE: Priestman Goode’s vision for standard class includes dedicated conference zones

There’s a very simple reason why long-distance operators continue to offer first class – it makes them lots of money. Typically on an intercity service a third of carriages will be first class – it is estimated that on such routes, operators derive 50 to 75% of their income from the sale of these seats. This is also the case in the airline industry where premium seating – business and first class – has a huge impact on the bottom line. “British Airways’ Club World delivered a substantial return on investment for the airline – its overall investment in the seating was recovered in less than the first year,” says Martin Darbyshire, managing director of strategic design consultancy tangerine, which worked with the flag carrier on its patented ‘Yin Yang’ product.

Another UK design firm with an impressive portfolio of both rail and airline projects is Priestman Goode – its most recent rail project is the Mercury, a high-speed train concept for the UK, which provides a fresh take on the changing needs of passengers and how this relates to classes. The open plan, double design features traditional commuter seats alongside private berths for families, private parties or business meetings; and a first-class section including a luxury lounge and bar.

“If you want to attract business travellers, particularly those who normally travel by air, then you have to offer a business-class experience on the train,” says director Paul Priestman. “In the first class of the future, you would have more space, wider seats and more legroom – that’s really what you are paying for. You might also get complementary service as you would in business class



**“To attract people who would otherwise travel by air, you have to give them something special”**

Paul Priestman, director, Priestman Goode

on an aircraft,” he continues. “With Mercury, we decided to go for a double-decker design as it gives you up to 40% more capacity for the same length of train. If you are going to attract people who would otherwise travel by air, you have to give them something special, which is why we did the double-height bar area.”

Greater comfort, the extra room provided by a ‘2+1’ configuration and, above all, a quiet atmosphere conducive to work will also be crucial. As one plc chief executive puts it: “The value in first class is that it’s a quieter environment and – it seems dreadful to say – but people like ourselves want the space to work, that isn’t overcrowded, where we can get the laptop out and papers and do some work in peace and comfort.”

**New horizons**

Priestman is currently designing a train for the Beijing to Hong Kong service: “It’s just like first class in an aircraft, you go from a semi-reclined seat in economy, to more leg room and more recline in business, through to a full flatbed in first class and VIP.”

However he notes this is unlikely to ever be required in the UK, where journey times just aren’t long enough. This isn’t the case in China, where journeys such as the 1,200-mile trip between Beijing and Hong Kong, even by high-speed train, still take many hours.

“As journey times come down, the need for extreme comfort is not quite so important, in the same way that on an aircraft for a short journey you are quite happy to go economy class,” says James Park of James Park Associates, which has worked internationally on a number of railway design projects, including the Orient Express.

Back in the UK, when East Coast Mainline sought to improve its first-class offer, it simply consulted passengers. “The comments and suggestions we received have helped to shape the new complimentary product offer we’ve recently brought in,” says Smith. “Depending on the time of day, you can enjoy yoghurt bars, fruit cakes, peanuts, crisps and a variety of biscuits,” he continues. “Customers also told us there was too much clutter on tables, hampering their ability to work, use laptops, relax and to eat. So snacks are now being served up on clean and clutter-free tables, without the plastic table containers that passengers said had to go. On board, employees will now serve water and condiments direct to customers, giving them the chance to give better, more personalised service.”

**Future trends**

Going forward, Park foresees seats which will be “more elegant, more minimalist and much more comfortable”. However, Priestman notes that the materials from which they are made will have to be durable and easily maintained, if that elegance is not to be tarnished by the wear and tear of buffet trolleys.

RIGHT: Hitachi Class 395 interior for Southeastern





ABOVE: East Coast First class lounge at London Euston station

Darbyshire recommends keeping seat controls as simple as possible: “You don’t need lots of buttons in front of you that you have to press to find out what they do,” he says.

Beyond improved seating, Park sees another opportunity: “One of the things I like about trains is the window, it’s an experience like no other, you have a window you can look out of and enjoy the landscape as it goes past,” he says. “At the moment safety requirements mean you have to have metallic pillars between the windows, but if you had one continuous strip of glass that would be great.”

Increasingly there is a feeling that the real developments in first-class rail travel will come not so much on the train but across the entire experience, from the moment of booking a ticket. This would encompass first-class lounges, porter service and transport to and from stations. “It’s going to be about making the experience of getting into the station and onto the train more seamless,” says Park. “In other words, perhaps the terminal building should have a softer and more social emphasis than most of those we’re currently familiar with.”

Priestman echoes these sentiments: “I think that the station experience is still 100 years old. Look at what has happened in hotels, look at what has happened in airports, there’s massive room for improvements there. First class should not be about queuing up with everybody and trying to get a ticket out of a machine, you don’t do that at airports. If we are trying to get first-class passengers out of their luxury cars and out of their jets, then the experience has to become better, standing on a concrete platform in the rain and getting wet is not right.”



**“You don’t need lots of buttons that you have to press to find out what they do”**

Martin Darbyshire, managing director, tangerine

## ◀ MIXED MESSAGES

The future of rail travel is unlikely to be limited to a choice between just standard and first class. After all, the early railways had a third class – open carriages – until the 1844 Railway Act ruled that they must be covered. By contrast, in present day China, the development of classes is towards the upper end, with standard, first, VIP and super VIP.

But division need not necessarily be in terms of comfort or service. We still have buffet cars and, until recently, trains had separate carriages devoted to smokers. The latter have gone but, in the age of the mobile phone, operators have introduced the quiet carriage. Could this point the way to the introduction of a ‘family zone’ in which beleaguered parents could allow their children to run riot on long journeys?

“If a family is going on holiday, perhaps they can book a space for four people,” ponders Paul Priestman of design firm, Priestman Goode. “This sort of thing doesn’t have to take up capacity, it just requires thought. Obviously you have to flex, so during peak and commuter times, it can be used for something else, but there is that opportunity and it’s certainly something we have thought about on aircraft – if the journey is going to last a long time, what are you going to do with those boisterous kids. You can have quiet carriages – why not noisy carriages?”

There are also private meeting or conference facilities for business travellers; and in some countries separate carriages are designated for men and women according to traditional religious and cultural traditions. Admittedly, all of this would cause something of a ticketing headache, but it also explains why the future of rail interiors relies upon a flexible open-plan design to allow such divisions, as and when required.



Despite the lack of amenities at stations, it would seem for all but commuter journeys, first-class travel is here to stay. The challenge for operators is to ensure it reflects shifting culture, lifestyle, technology trends and passenger demands – all of which now change at a far more rapid pace than the lifetime of a rail carriage. “From our point of view, modularity and flexibility are exactly what we build into our interiors,” says

Bombardier’s UK communications director, Neil Harvey. “We configure interiors to suit operators’ needs with anything from reclining seats to compartments. We have our seating on tracks so, fairly simply in the depot, the seats can be reconfigured to make them unidirectional or bidirectional and you can take out or add tables and you can add or remove interior partitions. It’s something that has been developing over the last 10 years.” ✕