



Beyond expectations – the future of first class, high-speed rail travel

ROB BASSIL & PAUL RUTTER discuss the potential for premium passenger accommodation within future rolling stock designs

Ambitious plans to adopt high-speed rail as a solution to future mobility have been gathering momentum worldwide in recent years. Current initiatives include a ¥600 billion commitment to a dedicated high-speed network in China and a proposed \$8 billion investment for a countrywide network in the USA. There are now many examples where high-speed rail competes directly with airlines, offering seamless journeys from city centre to city centre in style and comfort. On the most successful routes, like Barcelona to Madrid or London to Paris, trains have captured 60-70 per cent of the market and this trend

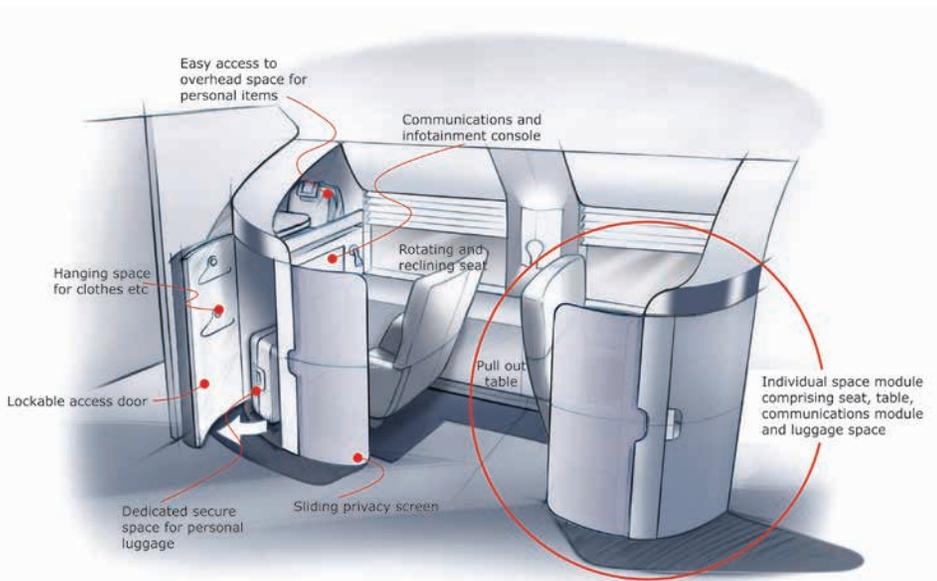
seems set to continue.

The technology to deliver fast, reliable trains on dedicated high-speed lines has been well proven. The Shinkansen service in Japan, the TGV network in France and the ICE in Germany have all demonstrated the economic benefits of high-speed rail networks. Towns and cities linked by such routes show improved trade and business opportunities in addition to the improved mobility offered to passengers.

However, speed alone is not sufficient to guarantee long-term commercial success in rail or air travel. Even Concorde, which traded on its unique ability for supersonic flight, eventually lost out to slower but more comfortable services that allowed passengers to arrive at their destination a little later, but more refreshed. For many business people, long distance travel has become a way of life. Airlines recognised this early on and have spent years honing their in-flight services, embodied through the rise of upper first class and the development of lay flat bed seating,

personalised 'at-seat' services and extensive individual infotainment options.

Historically it has always been assumed that for journey times above three hours, air travel will be favoured. However, recent market research shows that for journeys up to four hours, there is now a clear passenger preference for trains over planes. One key reason given for this preference was the freedom offered by direct boarding without extensive security checks and the inconvenience of airport interchanges. Also important was the ability to use travel time productively with the availability of constant on-board communication through broadband, WiFi and mobile networks. Airlines now have to struggle with security issues, air traffic congestion and poor punctuality records. European rail travel achieves on average 90-95 per cent of journeys either on time or within 15 minutes of the scheduled arrival time, whereas the best the airlines can manage is 63-68 per cent. So it is widely acknowledged



that high-speed rail is becoming competitive for journeys with a planned duration of up to five hours.

The relatively short duration of rail journeys has been used in the past to justify the basic level of service available on trains. However, with high-speed rail extending acceptable journey times to four or five hours, this argument no longer holds water. Passenger research makes it clear that train travel currently isn't perceived as offering a genuine first class experience. Trains almost universally provide regimented rows of seats with little or no concession for personal luggage and limited opportunities for privacy. There is

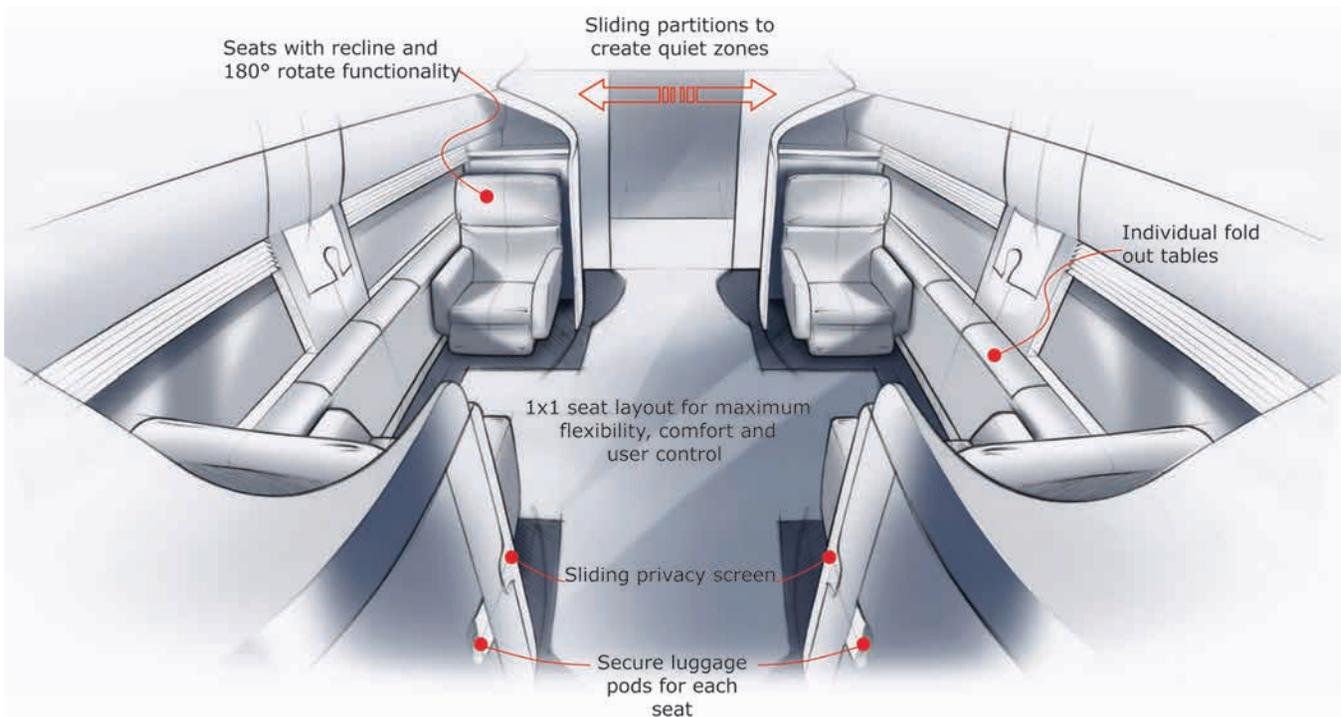
little service differentiation between first and standard class on most high-speed rail links. Airlines, by contrast, have taken a much more creative approach to seat layouts and interiors. They have introduced novel staggered seating configurations, ingenious folding privacy screens, individual control of 'at-seat' facilities and interior designs incorporating dynamic mood lighting and high quality material finishes. As a result, modern aircraft are rightly seen as setting the service design standard for others to follow.

A step change in approach is needed if high-speed train services are to compete successfully with the airlines in the long

term. At present, in an effort to optimise the revenue stream from first class rail seating, seat numbers have always been maximised at the expense of personal space. This, in turn, reduces the appeal of travelling first class, depressing the premium that can be charged for a first class ticket and generating further pressure to increase seating densities. This vicious circle has stifled innovation in the premium class sector.

In the authors' opinion there is a strong case to be made for raising the level of design applied to the first class service offer, allied with a radical rethink of seat numbers and layouts. For a true premium class service, personal space and the control of your travelling environment are a priority. The other key factor that rail is uniquely able to deliver is the ability to travel with unrestricted access to all your luggage, not just a small carry-on bag. These benefits can best be provided with a rotating seat and dedicated 'at seat' luggage storage facility.

One possible design concept uses a 1+1 seat configuration with a centre aisle for equal access to all seats. Groups of four seats would be separated to demarcate a compartment area. Each seat can face into the compartment when passengers wish to travel as a group or to socialise with a travelling companion. Or it can be rotated to interface with a personal module, fitted with its own luggage storage, infotainment, power sockets and



communications console. A pull-out screen completes the personalisation of each seating zone by offering total privacy from the other carriage users when desired.

This 1+1 configuration inevitably restricts seat numbers. The proposed layouts indicate that instead of 20-30 seats per carriage, a premium class interior of this format will offer only half that number. However the beauty of this layout is the freedom it provides for passengers to personalise their travel space. No longer does luggage have to be left unsecured or out of sight in common storage areas close to vestibules. For longer journeys it would be feasible to unpack items to make your journey more comfortable. Business suits and ball gowns could be hung in the wardrobe facility to arrive as fresh and uncrumpled as their owners.

The ability to compartmentalise the premium saloon area makes group bookings more attractive for business or leisure use. The seat rotation feature means that passengers can configure their space to suit their requirements, not having to make do with a

solution that is pre-defined or pre-configured by the operator.

For operators, the key benefit is the opportunity to charge a significant premium for this enhanced first class service, taking a lead from airline pricing models. No longer is first class seen as just an expensive extravagance with little added value. A premium class interior can offer true value that passengers will want to engage with and ultimately will be happy to pay for on a regular basis. As a result a smaller number of fully subscribed premium priced seats will replace the current high density, low value, underutilised first class seating. Crucially, the bottom line impact will be increased revenue per carriage.

This opportunity is upon us now and it is time to act quickly. The enabling technology exists and has been proven on recent projects. All that is needed to make premium high-speed rail travel a reality is the vision and commitment from the relevant manufacturers and operators. ■



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