

AI to introduce first class seats in A350-1000 aircraft

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New Delhi: Air India is preparing to introduce first class seats in its large wide-body aircraft, the A350-1000, which is expected to be inducted into its fleet within the next couple of years.

The airline sees opportunities in its aviation network where first class seats will be a valuable addition, helping the airline capture a larger share of the global market.

"First class is a product that remains a niche offering for many of the top airlines on prominent long-haul routes. It's not a product that is going away. Many leading airlines are developing their next-generation first class products. We are not the only ones making this move," said Nipun Aggarwal, Air India's Chief Commercial Officer, during a media interaction.

Currently, Air India's fleet consists of 202 planes, including 67 wide

body ones. Among them, 27 are B777s, and 40 are B787s. Of the 67 wide body planes, all legacy B777s and some leased B777s have first class seats. It also has three other wide body planes. Medium wide body aircraft — A350-900 and B787-9 — that have 300-325 seats — and small wide body plane — B787-8 having 250-300 seats.

“First class seats are an aspirational product, which we want to have it to compete with the best airlines. It defines how you run and build an airline. We are putting it on A350-1000 aircraft... some of them will have the product. It will, however, take some time to build the product,” said Aggarwal.

Large wide body aircraft — A350-1000s and B777Xs — will have 325-400 seats. “This product is an unavoidable need, if you want to cater to markets of mega cities like London, New York, etc, since they have good first class markets. Even if you have a private jet, you cannot fly to the US without one stop. If you have a first class product you can fly direct and reach faster,” he said.

The airline has decided to retrofit its wide body planes, starting with Boeing 787s, this year while the retrofit of 27 legacy Airbus 320 neos is expected to be completed by the middle of 2025.

Air India serves around 63 million passengers and most of them fly domestic or short-haul international. These flights are operated with narrow body aircraft. Almost the entire narrow bodies, which are serving almost 80% of the customers, will see a new retrofitted and modern product. They will see good product in place by the second half of this year, Aggarwal said.

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