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Air France Woos China's Affluent Travelers With 'Flavor Of France'

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Air France's new first-class suite with a lie-flat bed that was first unveiled in Shanghai. (Air France)

As a growing number of wealthy Chinese travelers head abroad, Air France is hoping luxe new

accommodations and targeted marketing will help to lure them away from global competitors.

On the New York leg of a three-country international media campaign unveiling its newly designed cabins that include the addition of lie-flat beds in first and business class, airline executives emphasized the importance of the China market in an interview with *Jing Daily*. The company is spending around \$3 billion to up the luxury factor of its planes in order to compete with high-end rivals, especially when it comes to enticing Asian flyers.

The China market is vitally important to the company's new initiative. It held its first launch event celebrating the redesign not in its home base of Paris, but in Shanghai last month. The airline currently has 80 flights to mainland China, the largest portfolio out of all European airlines.

Thanks to China's ongoing anti-corruption campaign that has cracked down heavily on official travel budgets, Air France's new first-class passengers are dramatically different from those several years ago. "In the old days, the travelers from China were officials. Now, it's no longer the case because the Chinese government decided to control all these kinds of expenses," Air France-KLM's Executive Vice-President of Commercial-Passenger Business Patrick Alexandre told *Jing Daily*. The rapid growth of the number of wealthy Chinese individuals means that a consumer base of younger, newly affluent jet-setters is replacing officials traveling on the government's tab. "This new young generation is now traveling. For us, it's more or less the same number of passengers, but they're completely different," he said.

As a result, the airline is taking a highly consumer-oriented approach in China. Active on Chinese social media, the company launched its new WeChat account last month, and offers special amenities for Chinese passengers. "Despite the fact that they want to fly and to test a new flight experience, a luxury experience, they want to feel at home," said Alexandre. The company's China flights offer translators and Chinese food, while all flights are equipped with Chinese-language films and entertainment options.

Air France's China marketing efforts for its upscale sections are based on convincing Chinese customers that air travel can be considered a luxury on par with an expensive handbag or fancy car. "The challenge we have to overcome is that Chinese customers don't necessarily view airline travel or air travel as a luxury product," said Air France-KLM Executive Vice-President of Commercial Marketing-Passenger Business Pieter Bootsma. "The best way to do that is to associate with another luxury brand." For the company's launch of its exhibition in Shanghai, it partnered with Ferrari, Louis Vuitton, and Grand Hyatt Shanghai to promote a

more upscale image. "Usually the other partner has a different context than you have in the luxury market in China. By combining forces, you can try to grow the market," said Bootsma.

While China-specific initiatives are important, the airline also believes that maintaining its

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they are wishing for Paris," said Alexandre.



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