As cars are getting smarter, more connected, and doing more on their own to help the driver, auto manufacturers have been jockeying for position on where to add features and increase both luxury and profit margin. The interior finishes (i.e., cloth vs. "pleather" vs. leather) have long been an upgrade area. Manufacturers like Porsche have taken the art of the upgrade and option to new heights by defining every surface possible on the interior as an upgrade item to be wrapped in either leather or carbon fiber.

Recently, the big target area for luxury was the infotainment system. This was for both the front seat passenger including driver control, and the rear headrest/rear seat entertainment systems. These systems moved from just rear speakers to central aisle and per-seat video displays, tablet and connectivity integration, and wireless sound management.

The next big area was advancing the luxury of the front seats. Automakers added both heating and cooling, power adjustments for height/tilt/position from the pedals, integrated air vents, and active multi-mode massage for the legs and back of the driver. Recently, the driver's seat has been adding "driver's health" features for monitoring their breathing, heartbeat, body temperature, and muscle fatigue levels.

This luxury has been slowly spreading to the rear seats. The main feature that is being added is power adjustment and the ability to recline. The power adjustment has been in very-high-end luxury cars for over a decade on a "fixed" position seat. The reclining feature is a new power addition. Cars like the Mayback, Mercedes 500 series, started the trend. Next, luxury Japanese brands joined in, with the option being available on cars from Infinity and Lexus.

The full-function rear seat has been a prominent feature of the Korean entries to the market - first by Hyundai and now by Kia. Figure 1 illustrates the multi-function control that drives the power adjust and reclining rear seats of the Kia K900. The luxury of the vehicles is no longer limited to driver's comfort, but there is individual temperature control for rear passenger seating areas.
Figure 1: The multi-function control that drives the power adjust and reclining rear seats of the Kia K900.

The desire to add comfort to the rear passengers is not limited to luxury cars. A number of trucks have moved to four-door models to provide easier access and improved space for the rear seat passenger. Following this direction, aftermarket suppliers are developing improved comfort for these vehicles.
Figure 2: A four-door Toyota Tundra has the split rear seat modified to be a reclining rear seat.

Figure 2 shows a four-door Toyota Tundra that has the split rear seat modified to be a reclining rear seat. The cab space and legroom are more than sufficient, and the higher-end interior options for the vehicle available from the factory show that the truck, while still a practical utilitarian work vehicle, is also addressing the non-workday or end-of-workday transportation and comfort needs.

As these features become more standardized for the luxury cars, the power rear seats should be moving down to the mainstream soon. It is a key differentiator for the cars as the ubiquity of connected rear seat entertainment is no longer being considered just an option - but a minimum requirement - by the current generation of car buyers.