

Business aviation market buoyant

Plenty of deals and air travel revolutions in the pipeline were revealed at the recent European Business Aviation Convention and Exhibition

Mediterranean weather and a wide selection of the latest fancy hardware drew a record 10,000 visitors to Europe's premier business aviation show, EBACE at Palexpo in Geneva. Attractions included the distinctive 'Javelin' Personal Jet, Dassault's new 700X and the Eclipse 500 Very Light Jet (VLJ) making its international debut.

Easy access to the exhibition's static display, this year home to more than 50 business aircraft, makes EBACE a hit with visitors. In addition, the host city is conveniently located for visitors from the Middle East, Russia and Asia, and they prefer Geneva to the much larger NBAA

- National Business Aviation Association - gathering in Atlanta, Georgia, in September.

Confidence in the venue is so strong that EBACE will continue in Geneva until at least 2012. This year, more than 340 exhibitors took 1,410 booth spaces.

New entrants

The buoyancy of the business aviation market has seen dominant players - Gulfstream, Bombardier, Cessna, Dassault and newly re-named Hawker Beechcraft - joined by new entrants with smaller jets, among them Eclipse Aviation, Adam Aircraft, Grob Aerospace, HondaJet, Diamond Aircraft and Embraer with its new Phenom family. "The VLJ (very light jet) air taxis, with an entry

level price tag of \$1.52 million, will radically change the landscape of the charter market," opined Gregg Thomas, CEO of PrivatAir, which began as the corporate jet fleet of the Latsis Group 30 years ago. Thomas singled out the advanced plans of JetBird, headed by former Royal Bank of Scotland asset finance chief Domhnall Slattery.

JetBird intends to become Europe's largest air taxi operator in the next decade. It says it will halve the going rate, revolutionising the way people travel by air. From early 2009, it will offer an on-demand point-to-point private jet service in Europe, operating 100 Embraer Phenoms, initially out of two as yet undisclosed European hubs.

Today, PrivatAir manages a fleet of 40 aircraft, ranging from a King Air 200 to a Boeing 757. Gregg Thomas said it would certainly be open to managing a fleet of VLJs.

However, amid this boom in the

non-US marketplace, access is becoming a problem for the 2,800-strong European aircraft fleet. European Business Aviation Association CEO Brian Humphries cited London Luton Airport, now slot-controlled, and Geneva, particularly impacted by low-cost carrier growth. Private jet users were also feeling the pinch at airports they had hitherto kept viable.

Rights

Humphries advocated that, just like commercial scheduled operators, private aviation too should have 'grandfather rights'. Referring to London Luton, he declared: "If we hold 20 per cent of an airport's slots, then we too should have rights."

Enforcement of carbon trading for aircraft weighing more than 5,700kg, new security rules and disquiet about airlines muscling business jets out of European skies are other major concerns.

In his keynote speech at EBACE, celebrated aviator Dr Bertrand Piccard highlighted the "green concern" worrying business aviation, and he challenged the industry needs to recognise that it must find a renewable source of energy for flight - which is likely to be biofuel, rather than solar power.

Solar Impulse

A medical doctor, Piccard is the architect of the Solar Impulse Project. Its mission is to fly a solar-powered aircraft around the world and the prototype, scheduled for completion by next summer, should be ready for its first flight in 2009. Drawing power from lithium batteries, it will gain altitude during the day and descend at night.

Solar power

While solar power may be the long-term future, turboprops were firmly back in vogue at EBACE, just

▼ Gulfstream GIV



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▲ Bombardier Challenger 605

as in the regional airline business. JetFly of Luxembourg, Europe's first fractional ownership company, announced an order for four

Piaggio Avanti IIs for delivery in 2008 to complement its expanding fleet of single turboprop EADS-Socata TBM 700s and Pilatus PC-12s. JetFly also signalled a partnership with luxury travel provider Avolus, which will see the latter

offer fractional ownership shares on single turboprops in the UK and Ireland.

Hawker Beechcraft revealed two new enhanced King Air variants, the GTI and GT offering higher speeds and faster rates of climb, while

RUAG of Germany disclosed plans to re-start production of the Dornier 228 for special mission use.

As usual, EBACE 2007 brought a flurry of new order notifications. Peters Group Worldwide of the US is to take up five Airbus A318 Elites. NetJets Europe CEO Mark Booth announced the purchase of 32 more Hawker 4000 entry-level jets, worth about \$700 million. NetJets Europe plans to double its flight deck crew to 1,500 over the next four years. It has just taken on 100 additional pilots, and a further 125 will join by year end.

A commitment by ETRIC Aviation of Luxembourg to take 180 Eclipse 500 six-seater jets from Eclipse Aviation marked CEO Vern Raburn's largest European order to date. ETRIC has entered into a joint-venture with Turkey-based Atasay to start an air taxi service in the country.

UK-based European Skytime said it was to add a Bombardier Learjet 40XR and a 45XR version, optimised

for high-altitude airports, to its fleet. Other Bombardier signings embraced a Challenger 605 for Bahrain's Bexair, a Challenger 300 for Portugal's Omni Aviação, and an ultra-long-range Global Express XRS for Echo of Lebanon.

Potential

In a deal potentially worth more than \$650 million, National Air Services of Saudi Arabia disclosed a firm order three Gulfstream G450s for operation in the Middle East and an option on 17 further aircraft.

ExecuJet, worldwide distributor for the Grob Aerospace Spn light jet offered with Porsche Design interior, announced two customers from Abu Dhabi: Prestige Jets and Falcon Aviation Services, both to take delivery in 2009. "The Spn is going to be a significant game changer in the Middle East," stated Falcon's general manager Philip Markham.