

Service



JAL's 480-520-seat 777-300 "Star Jets" operate its regional trunk routes, replacing 747s and DC-10s

of the decade. Boeing probably wishes the much delayed ultra-long-range 777-200X/300X derivatives had been able to follow their original development timetable as closely.

The higher capacity -300 stretched version was aimed specifically at the Asian market and at operators looking to replace Boeing 747-200s. It was no surprise that when the stretched model received its go-ahead in June 1995, the four airlines which had placed 31 launch commitments were All Nippon Airways (ANA), Cathay Pacific, Korean Air and Thai Airways International.

The aircraft features a 19-frame, 10.1m stretch over the baseline -200, increasing typical seating to 368 (three-class) or 451 (two-class). Typical range with 368 passengers up to 10,545km (5,700nm). The 60.9m span is retained, but the larger model has strengthened fuselage sections, inboard wing and nose/main landing gear.

Boeing has offered the stretched version with powerplants from each of the "Big Three", including the Pratt & Whitney PW4090/4098, Rolls-Royce Trent 892, and the General Electric GE90, although no airline has specified the latter. Ironically, the planned longer-range version, the -300X, is only available with the GE powerplant.

The first 777-300 to fly, on 16 October, 1997, was the R-R-powered version, which received

US Federal Aviation Administration certification in May 1998. Launch customer Cathay Pacific took delivery of the first Trent 892-powered example the same month, while ANA was the first P&W customer, receiving its first -300 in June 1998.

By January, 31 777-300s were operating with eight airlines, and 17 more were on backlog. Sales for the stretched twinjet have slowed since the flurry at launch, with few new orders announced in recent years. Emirates has, however, chosen the model for its trunk routes to Europe and recently introduced the first two of four -300s it is acquiring on lease.

STRETCH SUPPORTER - CATHAY

Cathay had been eager for a larger 777 model from the start of the programme. Its initial order in April 1992 for up to 22 777-200s (11 firm orders/11 options) included the right to convert some options to the stretched version. "It's almost a two-engined [747] Classic. The Classics were to be phased out and this is a big aircraft with the economies of a twin on regional routes," says Cathay engineering director Derek Cridland.

The Hong Kong-based carrier operates the type on high-density routes such as those to Bangkok, Seoul, Singapore and Taipei, as well as to destinations in Japan.

Boeing's 777-300 reliability figures are the best for a widebody introduction

GUY NORRIS/LOS ANGELES
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BOEING SAYS ITS experience with the introduction of the 777-300 has been a case of "no news is good news". Mike Fleming, Boeing's 777 fleet support chief, says: "In terms of performance in service, it's been remarkably quiet, which is really an indication of its success. The airlines just wanted a 'carry more people' aircraft, and it appears that is what they have."

Although a relatively small fleet, particularly in Boeing terms, the 777-300's reliability figures stand out as the most successful of any new twin-aisle airliner on entry into service: scheduled reliability of a 12-month rolling average stands at 99.3%, while the three-month rolling average is 99.46%. "It is certainly the highest reliability of any widebody, but the key is sustained reliability. Anyone can have a 99% month now and then, but keeping it at that level or higher is the difference. If anything, it seems to be trending up slightly," says Fleming.

Since the first aircraft entered service with Cathay Pacific in May 1998, only once has any three-month rolling average dipped below 99%, to 98.7%. "We are satisfied with this rate, although we are not stopping," says Fleming. He adds that the company has a goal of keeping scheduled reliability of the 777-200/300 family as a whole at 99%. "We just have to keep working at it."

Among the potential in-service issues for which Boeing braced itself with the -300 was the ground manoeuvring capability of the aircraft - the longest airliner ever produced. Even here, Boeing says, there have been "no issues". The ground manoeuvre camera system, installed to help crews negotiate turns on taxiways and ramps, "is working and has not been a problem", says Fleming. Apparently, the only issues that have surfaced are those encountered by the 777 fleet as a whole, including recent troubles with the Hamilton Standard variable-speed constant-frequency generator system, fitted to all makes and models of the engines that power all 777s.

Turnaround times, another potential issue, have been "slightly longer in general", says Fleming, who believes this to be due largely to the shorter routes, and denser intra-Asian route network ▶