

FLEET RENEWAL DAVID FULLBROOK / SINGAPORE

Fiji moves to meet Pacific boom

Air Pacific set to decide this month on aircraft acquisition, with both Airbus and Boeing types being considered

Fiji's Air Pacific is evaluating Airbus and Boeing widebodies as part of the all-Boeing operator's plans to meet rising demand for travel to the Pacific islands.

"We need to resolve future needs in the 400-plus and 250- to 300-seat range aircraft. Therefore [Airbus] A340 and [Boeing] 747 aircraft and A330 and 767 aircraft are all under review," says Air Pacific chief executive John Campbell.

Directors will consider proposals

and should decide on the future fleet when they meet this month.

Campbell does not say how many aircraft in each class are needed, but one of each seems most likely given the size of the current fleet and route network. The additional widebodies are likely to be leased, as Air Pacific's 747-200B and 767-300ER are both operated on lease. Air Pacific also owns two 737-800s.

In the meantime another 747-

200 or a -400 will be leased to allow Air Pacific to proceed with plans to expand services to North America and Australia. This will free the carrier's 767 to provide additional services planned for New Zealand.

Campbell gives no timeframe for implementing these plans, but with the search for the 747 under way it is likely extra services will be slotted into the timetable from October.

Qantas, which owns a 46% stake in Air Pacific, may influence the

airline's choice as it already provides some fleet support. The Australian flag carrier operates 767s, but has A330s on order. It has leased Air Pacific its 747-200 and provides ad hoc charters as required. For the last few weeks of July it was providing an almost daily service to Suva, replacing the Air Pacific flights grounded by workers striking over a raft of issues including pay, rosters and layoffs following the 2000 coup in Fiji.

LOW-COST CARRIERS

EasyJet/Go merge, Bmibaby grows up

EasyJet and Go have formally merged to become Europe's largest low-cost carrier (LCC), with the combined entity revealing that its long-expected fleet expansion deal is nearing completion and will include provisions for 240 aircraft.

EasyJet says the finer details of the £374 million (\$586 million) integration are being worked out by a team led by Ed Winter, Go's chief operating officer and now also chief executive following Barbara Cassani's departure. The two operations will be brought together under a single air operator's certificate by 29 March 2003 when the winter schedule ends, and the Go brand will disappear. Integration efforts are under way.

The airline has a combined fleet of 62 aircraft and 83 routes, and carried 14 million passengers in the 12 months to June, making it bigger than Ryanair - previously the largest LCC in Europe - on every count. EasyJet chief executive Ray Webster is reported to have said he wants to conclude a deal with Airbus or Boeing for 120 aircraft "within a month or so". The airline has also revealed that the deal will include price guarantees on an additional 120 aircraft.

EasyJet would use some of the new aircraft to expand German car-

rier DBA, which it is likely to buy from British Airways by next July.

Meanwhile, BMI British Midland is to transfer the rest of its Boeing 737 fleet to its low-cost operation Bmibaby by the second quarter, in a move that could cause pilot disquiet. The airline has replaced its regional operations from the UK's East Midlands Airport with new Bmibaby services. Bmibaby will also start services from Cardiff, becoming the UK's second-largest low-cost carrier after EasyJet/Go in terms of destinations served.

The airline currently operates 13 routes, and is adding flights to Amsterdam, Belfast International, Brussels National, Edinburgh, Glasgow International, Paris Charles de Gaulle, Jersey, Salzburg and Toulouse.

BMI management is understood to have told its mainline and regional pilots that their employment contract, which includes clauses concerning relocation, aircraft type and pay structure, is to be rescinded by September.

The airline will not discuss pilot contracts, but says that "all Boeing pilots will have the option of working for Bmibaby". The British Air Line Pilots Association is calling for the change to be made without any compulsory job losses.

SAFETY PAUL DUFFY / MOSCOW

Faulty stabiliser is suspected after Il-86 crashes on take-off

Investigators probing the fatal crash of an Ilyushin Il-86 in Moscow are focusing on the horizontal stabiliser. The aircraft, operated by Pulkovo Airlines, crashed shortly after take-off from Moscow Sheremetyevo Airport on 28 July.

The 350-seater (RA-86060) was operating a positioning flight to the airline's technical base in St Petersburg with 16 crew on board (including four flightdeck crew), all but two of whom were killed. According to Russia's aviation authority, the GSGA, the ferry flight was being made after the aircraft suffered an unspecified technical problem while operating a holiday charter to Moscow from Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi.

The 19-year old aircraft reached an altitude of 560ft (200m) and, say eyewitnesses, pitched up dramatically before crashing 1,200m from the end of the runway. Initial analysis of flight data recorders indicate that the aircraft suffered a horizontal stabiliser failure. It is understood that the stabiliser began deflecting from the normal take-off position just after the Il-86 lifted off, pitching it nose up. The elevators were found in the fully down position. The GSGA has instructed operators flying the 35 Il-86s in Russian service to inspect elevators and controls.

Around 50 Il-86s are in operation worldwide. While this is the type's third total loss, it is the first to result in fatalities on board the aircraft. The first Il-86 to be destroyed in an accident was hit by a Boeing 737-200 while parked at Delhi Airport in 1984. Another Il-86 was written off last September when it landed with its gear retracted at Dubai.



Investigators are examining the behaviour of the horizontal stabiliser