

FLEET DEVELOPMENT

Shandong
opts for five
Caravans

Shandong Airlines has dropped plans to acquire two more Bombardier Challenger 604 executive jets. But the carrier is going ahead with a proposal to buy five Cessna 208 Caravans.

Shareholders have approved the decision by the company's board to cap the Challenger fleet at two and proceed with the Caravan order. It appears demand for executive jet charters, in China and elsewhere in Asia, has failed to meet expectations, despite an agreement signed in December between US-based Bombardier subsidiary Flexjet and Shandong to make the aircraft available to Flexjet Asia.

Shandong expects to transfer its second Challenger to Rainbow Jet, its charter subsidiary, which operates the first one. Both were leased earlier this year from General Electric Capital Aviation Services.

Plans to buy five Caravans to provide cargo and passenger services on thin routes and to remote areas were first revealed in March 2001.

According to Cessna, in November 2000, Shandong had ordered one Grand Caravan and two Caravan 675s, equipped with amphibious floats, with options for 37 more Caravans.

One of the three amphibious Caravans has already been sold to Rainbow Jet. Now shareholders have approved the transfer of the remaining two.

IN BRIEF

FIRST SU-29

AO PTS, formerly Sukhoi Advanced Technologies, has delivered the first Su-29 two-seat aerobatic aircraft to a private Swiss customer. Further deliveries to customers in the Czech Republic, Germany, Russia and South Korea are scheduled by the end of the year.



Flaps remained up and gear down during the first flight from Albuquerque, New Mexico, which lasted for 62min

COVER STORY GRAHAM WARWICK / WASHINGTON DC

Eclipse 500 takes to the skies

Successful delayed first flight unlocks financing required to move towards certification

Eclipse Aviation has begun flight-testing its Eclipse 500 personal jet, a milestone which triggered the release of \$25 million in customer deposits previously held in escrow, pending first flight. The company is considering launching another financing round following the successful first flight on 26 August, says chief executive Vern Raburn.

The aircraft completed a 62min first flight from Albuquerque, New Mexico, after a month-long delay while Eclipse struggled to get the

Williams International EJ22 turbofans to start reliably and predictably. Raburn blames the high density altitude at Albuquerque: "The engines were very stable in flight," he says.

Density altitude for the flight was over 7,000ft (2,150m). "That's unusual for a first flight," says Raburn. "But take-off distance was where we said it would be. We are happy with the handling and stick forces were as expected." Flaps remained up and gear down during

the first flight. The second flight followed two days later.

The first aircraft is restricted to 18,000ft because it is not pressurised, and to 220kt (400km/h) because Eclipse has not conducted the ground-vibration testing needed for flutter clearance. This will be completed on the second, pressurised, fully conforming aircraft, which is expected to fly in November or December.

Eclipse decided to "descope" the first aircraft to reduce the funding required to reach first flight, which it hopes will attract the additional financing needed to complete certification. The first aircraft was built on production tooling and is "100% type designed, but not 100% conforming", says Raburn. It will be used for around 100h low/medium-speed testing, but the data cannot be used for certification.

Much of the avionics hardware is in the first aircraft, including the computer, integrated sensors, full-authority digital engine control and primary flight display. The autopilot, autothrottle and multi-function display are not fitted, and a lot of the avionics software functionality is not installed, but a flight-test data acquisition system is.

Raburn says major tasks include integrating the compact pressurisation and air-conditioning system, and testing the automatic flight-control system. Certification of the EJ22 engine is due seven months ahead of aircraft approval, allowing room for slippage, he adds.

Williams is due to begin flying the candidate type design engine this week on its Sabreliner testbed.

AMALGAMATION

Nimbus moves into fractional
ownership with merger plan

Nimbus Group is planning to merge with a Miami-based company which is setting up a regional fractional ownership programme using BAe Jetstream 31/32s. Nimbus's own hopes of setting up a nationwide air taxi system were dashed in July when Eclipse Aviation terminated its 1,000-aircraft order for Eclipse 500 personal jets after the company was unable to raise the required deposit.

Nimbus has signed a letter of intent to merge with Horizons Aviation in a stock-swap deal that will give Horizons a controlling stake in the Fort Lauderdale-based firm and result in a change of Nimbus management.

Horizons chairman and chief executive, Omar Botero, says: "Nimbus has a good concept, which, if properly structured, could be interesting." He has followed the various "mini-jet" development programmes and believes Eclipse is "at the forefront", but there have been no discussions with the manufacturer. He adds: "We will leave our options open."

To support its strategy for entering the fractional ownership market, last year Horizons formed engine maintenance company Turbine Support International (TSI) via several smaller acquisitions. In January, the company acquired aircraft management company Central Air Charter. Both it and TSI are based in Vero Beach, Florida. The companies will support Horizons' Affinity AirShares fractional programme due to start next January.

"Horizons was created to make corporate aircraft more accessible to mid-sized companies," says Botero, an entrepreneur who established overnight express and telecommunications companies with links into Latin America. The maintenance and charter company buys are intended to tackle maintenance scheduling, which Botero calls the "achilles heel" of fractionals.