

NAVIGATION

IBM, AMT bag cockpit system deals

Britannia Airways and Virgin Express are the latest European carriers to start equipping their fleets with electronic flight bag (EFB) devices designed to improve operational efficiency and eliminate paper manuals from the cockpit.

UK charter airline Britannia is to issue its 430 pilots with IBM ThinkPad laptops to create "e-flightdecks" on its fleet of 19 Boeing 757s and seven 767s, while Belgian low-fare carrier Virgin Express has opted for Aircraft Management Technologies' (AMT) Flightman EFB solution on its 14 Boeing 737-300/400s.

Chris Entwistle, Britannia flightcrew systems project manager, says the package uses in-house software to deliver aircraft manuals, take-off performance calculators, a flight-planning capability and notices to airmen (NOTAMS) to the pilots' laptops. "Pilots will be able to complete log forms electronically, saving significant time," Entwistle adds.

Britannia uses Weather Services International (WSI) to organise its weather and route charts and pilots will be able to update their laptops by remotely logging on to WSI, according to Entwistle. Although the ThinkPads will also allow pilots to view approach details and images, these features cannot be used during flight and Entwistle says that they will be used only for ground trials and for pilot information. The system is expected to be operational by mid-year.

The AMT Flightman system that has been selected by Virgin Express enables electronic data capture and management covering flight operations and maintenance; technical documentation; fuel and vendor management; onboard sales; weight and balance and performance calculations; and the display of flight plates on portable computers.

START-UP DAVID KAMINSKI-MORROW / LONDON

UAE's third airline cleared for take-off at Sharjah

Air Arabia planned as national carrier but network and aircraft fleet yet to be finalised

Plans to create a third national airline for the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have moved forward after a Sharjah government decree cleared the way for the formation of the new carrier, to be called Air Arabia.

Jointly owned by the Sharjah department of civil aviation (DCA) – which will hold 60% of the share capital – and the emirate's airport authority, Air Arabia is being developed to "provide travellers and tourists with yet another gateway" to the UAE, according to DCA chairman Sheikh Abdulla bin Mohammed Al Thani.

Specialists are working to complete a business plan which will detail the airline's probable route network and the size and type of fleet which it will operate.

"This important step has come to fruition after in-depth, intensive and extensive economic and socio-economic studies made earlier by an international consultant," says the airport authority.

Sharjah civil aviation director-general Ghanem Al-Hajri says: "Our intention is to have a small airline, serving our people and our business needs." He adds that the

business plan for the carrier should be completed in the "very near future", but he declines to give further details.

Sharjah has long considered setting up its own national airline. Two of the seven emirates which comprise the UAE are already represented by flag carriers: Emirates is owned by the government of Dubai while the government of Abu Dhabi is a joint shareholder in Gulf Air. Air Gulf Falcon, a private Sharjah-based wet-lease and cargo carrier, began operating services with Boeing 747s in 1999.

DIAGNOSTICS MICHAEL PHELAN / PARIS

Remote support tested

Snecma Services is testing remote diagnostic support for CFM International CFM56 turbofans and hopes to use the technology to guarantee against bearing failures for the entire life of an engine.

"We need to guarantee no inflight bearing failures for the engine life to make a worthwhile business case," says Snecma Services vice-president customer operations, Pierre-Emmanuel Gires. He hopes to offer the guarantee to customers "within two to five years", using existing aircraft datalinks.

Trials with selected CFM56 customers are monitoring vibration

levels at the bearings. "Some airlines are sending us the data in real time using ACARS [airborne communication and reporting system], while others are sending us the tapes each day," says Gires.

The two-shaft CFM56 has five bearings. Gires says the number three ball-bearing on the core is highly loaded. "If it goes, the damage causes an inflight shutdown, and can cost \$4 million." He says engine aerofoil failures usually start with bearing vibration problems.

The scheme is the first in a range of remote diagnostic applications Snecma Services plans.



Snecma aims to guarantee CFM56 bearings with remote diagnostics

CARGO

Thai hopes to add first freighters this year

Thai Airways International is looking to introduce its first dedicated freighters as it seeks to capitalise on the rapid growth in demand for air freight movements out of Asia.

The airline says it is considering the lease of two large freighters in the 100t payload category, specifically Boeing 747-200Fs, which it hopes can be put into service before the end of this year.

"Freighter aircraft will be added on the existing routes to Europe and the USA, and for some Asian routes," it says.

Thai has for several years been considering the addition of widebody freighters to help expand its cargo operation, which is already a standalone division.

The division currently takes in revenue from the carriage of freight in the bellyholds of its passenger aircraft and through tie-ups with other carriers.