

Pilots with launch customer AirTran will find a different working environment to the DC-9's



The 717 appears well suited to high frequency, short haul operations

Boeing's small adventure

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BOEING'S 717 is poised to be the newest aircraft to enter the much anticipated 100-seat airliner market. With joint US and European certification due in September, Boeing hopes to capture the lion's share of a projected 2,600-aircraft market through to 2017. Airbus Industrie's entry into the 100-seat arena with its A318, however, has made attainment of this goal far from certain.

Launched in October 1995 by McDonnell Douglas as the MD-95, the 717 has faced several major programme hurdles during its development. The first and perhaps most challenging was the near demise of ValuJet, its

initial launch customer. But ValuJet lives on as AirTran Airways, and its 50 firm orders and 50 options remain on Boeing's books.

The second was the merger of McDonnell Douglas and Boeing in 1997. Boeing already had a 100-seater in its product line, the 737-600, and industry analysts were sceptical that the company would offer two seemingly similar products. Boeing rallied to the cause of the MD-95, however, which it re-named the 717. The aircraft therefore became a symbol of the "new Boeing" and is being marketed as a low-cost airliner optimised for the short-haul market.

Since the 717's first flight in September, four aircraft have completed 1,200h of a projected 1,700h flight test programme. Over 90% of the

developmental flight testing has been accomplished so far, and 50% of the combined US Federal Aviation Administration/European Joint Aviation Authorities certification points have been demonstrated. *Flight International* was given the opportunity to fly the aircraft at Boeing's Long Beach, California, facility.

The goal of the 717 programme was to develop a 100-seat airliner optimised to provide the lowest total trip cost when operated at high frequency over about 500-900km stage lengths. Some would contend that the 717 is nothing more than an updated DC-9-30, but this is not the case. While justifiably proud of the aircraft's heritage, Boeing takes great pains to highlight the many differences and improvements the

