

BUSINESS

CLEARED FOR TAKEOFF: Small jets will offer new alternative for business travelers

Donald Staszko of Cohasset, a pilot and owner of Professional Airways LLC, has no plans to acquire an Eclipse. "It's too small of an airplane," he said. "I mean, you might as well get in a torpedo tube and go to Florida." (AMELIA KUNHARDT/The Patriot Ledger)

By STEVE ADAMS
The Patriot Ledger

Fast, fuel-efficient and inexpensive at least by jet standards, the Eclipse 500 is the first in a new kind of "very light jets" that could be taking to the skies this fall. Start-ups such as Lexington-based Linear Air are placing bets that the newest wrinkle in aviation will be a source of new clients for the private jet market.

"It's like a car service with wings," said William Herp, Linear Air's CEO and president.

Eclipse Aviation of Albuquerque, N.M., is expected to be the first manufacturer bringing this new breed of aircraft to market later this year. It has received more than 2,400 orders for the \$1.5 million Eclipse 500.

The company said it expects to receive approval from the Federal Aviation Administration within weeks and begin shipping the first models to clients by the end of the year.

Private jet companies on the South Shore are closely following the initial reception to VLJs, hoping they will give them an additional line of business.

Smaller than current models of private jets, the Eclipse 500 seats five passengers and a pilot. It travels at a top speed of 426 miles per hour, with a range of up to 1,300 miles.

Proponents say the plane's lower price and operating costs will enable operators to offer services comparable to existing private jet charters at up to half the price. At the same time, they hope to attract businesspeople who currently travel on commercial airlines but want to cut travel time by side-stepping layovers.

They also want to recruit travelers who currently drive or use executive coach services.

“It’s not going to be price-competitive with driving and commercial airlines, but (there) will be a time savings,” said Nate McKelvey, CEO of Quincy-based Jets International. “It’ll take some time to help (customers) understand the true benefits.”

As a test run of its business model while it awaits its first Eclipse jet, Herp’s company runs an air taxi service out of Bedford’s Hanscom Field and Westchester County Airport in White Plains, N.Y. Using Cessna Caravans, the shuttle takes travelers to popular destinations within a 500-mile radius, such as Nantucket and Teterboro, N.J.

Herp predicts the Eclipse service will appeal to small and medium-sized businesses such as engineering and marketing firms that are likely to send teams on day trips, particularly to areas not served by a major airport.

Linear Air will add an air taxi service in the Washington, D.C., area next spring, Herp said. By 2008, when it hopes to have its full allotment of 30 Eclipse jets, Linear plans on five or six taxi services in major metropolitan areas.

Herp estimated the cost of renting the five-seat Eclipse for a 600-mile round-trip at \$3,000, with a flight time of 45 minutes.

By comparison, booking a next-day flight from Boston’s Logan International Airport to Elmira, N.Y. this week - roughly a 600-mile round trip - would cost more than \$700 per person and three-and-a-half hours of travel time, including a layover.

Jets International, which currently brokers 250 flights a month on private jets, plans to incorporate Linear Air flights into its offerings. McKelvey, Jets International’s CEO, said it’s too soon to say how popular VLJs will become.

“No one out there has reviewed the operating costs of these aircraft, so we have to rely on the manufacturers at this point,” he said.

Most in the industry anticipate a savings of 20 to 40 percent compared with existing private jet travel, given VLJs’ anticipated lower fuel and maintenance costs.

“If you’re a professional and need to get out to Syracuse and you haven’t experienced private jet travel, are you willing to spend that money rather than driving or flying on a commercial carrier?” McKelvey said. “I don’t think anybody knows exactly how big this market is going to be.”

With the capability to land on runways as short as 2,300 feet, the Eclipse has the potential to open up private jet service to more than 30 airports in Massachusetts, including Marshfield Airport and Plymouth Municipal Airport. Current business jets require runways of at least 5,000 feet, limiting them to larger airports such as Hanscom, Logan and Hyannis Airport.

The combination of direct flights and a broader choice of destinations could make VLJs irresistible to corporate middle managers or entrepreneurs who place a premium on cutting travel time, said Don Smith, CEO of Hingham-based charter service Private Business Jets.

“Anytime you can save time and be more productive, there’s a great efficiency there,” Smith said.

Doubts remain, though, about whether the jets’ snug cabin - under five feet wide and just over four feet tall - will prove a deal-breaker for travelers. And the absence of a rest room is likely to raise eyebrows among travelers with weak bladders.

“I’m thrilled they are hitting the market, and they’ll obviously broaden the market for us, but they are extremely small and tight,” McKelvey said. “If you’re competing with a \$100 JetBlue ticket to Florida, this is not the solution for you.”

Donald Staszko of Cohasset, a pilot and owner of Professional Airways LLC, is among the skeptics. Staszko, whose Plymouth company operates a fleet of private jets including a nine-seat Hawker XP800 with transatlantic range, has no plans to acquire an Eclipse.

“It’s too small of an airplane,” he said. “I mean, you might as well get in a torpedo tube and go to Florida.”

Steve Hankin, CEO of Weymouth-based Sentient Jet, sees two potentially lucrative client markets for the Eclipse 500 - and one sure bet.

Air taxi services such as Linear and Florida-based DayJet, which has ordered 239 Eclipses, will attempt to convert travelers who drive or travel on commercial jets to use Eclipses. “I’m still not convinced personally that the economics are going to pay off on that,” Hankin said. “The model is completely unproven.”

VLJs will begin to appear in the charter jet marketplace in two or three years, after sufficient inventory has reached the market, Hankin said.

Eclipse is most likely to be a hit among owner-operators of propeller planes, who will take advantage of the nearly \$1.5 million price tag to buy their first jet.

“This is a great opportunity at low cost for them to fly a jet instead of a prop plane,” he said. “I think that market’s going to be hugely successful.”

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