The European event is bigger than ever

The European Business Aviation Convention & Exhibition (EBACE) is growing stronger. At the show’s inception in 2001 there might have been some who doubted the viability of an annual European business aviation show along the lines of the firmly established NBAA event in the U.S., but the 2007 edition, held May 22 through 24 in Geneva, weighed in as the biggest and best so far in the show’s seven-year history.

With a record-breaking 11,000 visitors and 354 exhibitors (up a healthy 18 percent from last year), the event faced a sold-out Hall 6 at the Palexpo Convention Center, forcing organizers to relocate many high-end airplane exhibitors with large display booths to Hall 7, adjacent to the static display. The 61 aircraft on display were a testament to the fact that Europe’s signature business aviation event—and the overseas market—is thriving. Indeed, the show promises to become even more cosmopolitan than its American cousin, with many U.S. exhibitors realizing that as the global business aviation market expands, they could reach a wider international audience at EBACE. Drawing visitors and exhibitors from Western and Eastern Europe, the Middle East and even Asia, the show is climbing in clear skies and is scheduled to take place in Geneva through 2012.

Manufacturers Log Big Sales

Emblematic of this growth are the sales deals announced on the EBACE stage. NetJets Europe on the first day of the show inked a deal worth more than $700 million with Hawker Beechcraft for 32 Hawker 4000 super-midsize business jets and their maintenance. The fractional operator said its European customers had been clamoring for an entry-level stand-up cabin aircraft, and the 4000, which received its type certification last November, fit the bill. The deal is in addition to the fifty 4000s already on order for NetJets’ U.S. operations. Deliveries will begin next year and continue through 2016. The Wichita-based manufacturer took another $30 million sale in the form of a pair of Hawker 900XPs to Spain’s Gestair Private Aviation, which will use them for European operations.

Continuing the momentum, Gulfstream netted a firm contract for three G450s from Saudi Arabia’s National Air Service. If the operator exercises options it took on 17 more, the agreement could be worth a potential $650 million. Deliveries will begin in the third quarter of 2009. NAS CEO Taher Aigueel says the deal is crucial to the future plans of his company, Saudi Arabia’s only licensed private aircraft operator. Gulfstream went on to add another G450 sale to UK charter operator London Executive Aviation. When that aircraft is delivered in 2009, it will be the first G450 on the UK charter market.

Another major transaction saw Cessna closing a deal worth $280 million with Austria-based JetAlliance. The purchase includes one CJ1+, six CJ2+s, five CJ3s, three XLS+s, one Sovereign, two Citation Xs and seven Citation Mustangs. According to JetAlliance CEO Lukas Lichtner-Hoyer, some of the aircraft will be used by Austrian Business Jet, a new partnership venture between his company and Austrian Airlines that will carry business jet passengers from Eastern Europe to Vienna to meet scheduled long-haul commercial flights.

Grob raked in orders for its SPs light jet. The company announced at EBACE that it holds firm orders for its first two years of production—amounting to more than 60 aircraft. The Swiss-German aircraft broke through to the Middle Eastern market at EBACE, with orders from two Abu Dhabi-based operators. The four SPs destined for Falcon Aviation Services will be split between six-seat executive layout and 10-seat configuration suitable for conversion as air ambulances, while newly formed Prestige Jet-part of the Al Yasi group—plans to use a pair of SPs for VIP service as well as shuttle operations to the group’s steel factory in Oman.

While the brisk sales pace, coupled with the length of the OEM backlogs, reflects the current vitality of the business aviation market, the absence of significant new aircraft launch announcements at EBACE could be seen as a sign of caution among airframers. (See box at right for a list of upgrades that replaced new-model introductions in the spotlight.) One sight on the show floor that did raise eyebrows was Cessna’s mock-up of its large-cabin business jet concept. The design, which is expected to accommodate nine passengers, has yet to be defined in terms of interior arrangements, avionics or engines, but according to company chairman, president and CEO Jack Pelton, a firm decision on the future of the program could come by the end of the year.

The very light jet category is creating as much buzz in Europe and around the world as it has in the U.S. The much anticipated Eclipse 500 made its second European appearance at EBACE. While announcements of major new airframe designs were sparse at EBACE, a number of manufacturers announced upgrades to current models.

While the buzz at EBACE over the recently certified Falcon 7X, French airframer Dassault announced an upgraded version of its popular twin-engine Falcon 2000. The new Falcon 2000LX, featuring aviation partners blended winglets, will add 200 nm to the range of its Falcon 2000EX predecessor, for a total of 4,000 nm at Mach 0.80 and 41,000 feet. Dassault expects certification for the upgrade by the end of this year. The LX will replace the 2000EX starting with 2010 deliveries. Customers already holding 2000EX orders scheduled for delivery in 2008 and 2009 can get the winglets as an option for an additional $550,000. The 66-inch-tall winglets add 6 feet 9 inches to the wingspan of the Falcon 2000 and 275 pounds to its empty weight. With the 2000LX’s longer legs, more non-stop city pairs such as New York to Moscow or Paris to New Delhi are now within its reach.

Piaggio Aero Industries, which produces the Avanti II, announced that the airplane will be getting even faster. The company received EASA approval for installation of Pratt & Whitney Canada PT6-66B engines, giving the twin pusher a top speed of 402 knots (Mach 0.70). Piaggio says it holds orders for 85 Avanti IIs worth more than $550 million.

Four of those are destined for fast-growing, but inaccurately named, European turboprop operator Jetfly. The Avantis are part of an order of new aircraft that will more than double Jetfly’s fleet. The company said it favors turboprops because they are well suited to the European environment. Said company president Jacques Lemaigre du Breuil, “There are 2,200 airports in Europe, and if we operated jets our co-owners would be able to access only 700 of them.”

Hawker Beechcraft revealed two new upgrades to its venerable King Air line at EBACE. The King Air B200GT will receive recently certified Pratt & Whitney Canada PT6A-52 turboprops that will boost its speed by 25 knots to a high-speed cruise of more than 300 knots, while the King Air C90GTi will offer the Rockwell Collins Pro Line avionics suite. Both derivatives are expected to receive certification later this year, with deliveries beginning in the fourth quarter. -C.E.
**NEWS DIGEST**

**Shell Aviation** is planning to expand its Shell Card program to customers in Germany, France and Austria. The card--currently available in the U.S., U.K., Scandinavia and Switzerland--promises easier transactions with quick and reliable online approval and remote billing.

The newly created EGAMA, intended to be a European counterpart to the General Aviation Manufacturers Association, held its first meeting at EBACE. Dassault Falcon’s Olivier Villa was named the association’s first chairman; Piaggio Aero’s Jose Di Mase was selected as vice chairman.

**Honeywell** has delivered the first batch of 32 TFE731-50R engines destined for Hawker’s new 900XP. The latest version of the engine, derived from the TFE731-50 powering the Dassault Falcon 900DX, continues a series that began with the certification of the first TFE731 in 1972.

**Bombardier** has sold a pair of 4,000-nm-range Challenger 605s to Bahrain-based Bexair, which claims “the biggest and fastest growing aircraft in the region.” The company flies a mixed collection of aircraft, including Cessna Citation XLSes, an Embraer Legacy 600 and an Embracer Legacy 600. According to Bexair’s chairman, the company expects to become a global operation through alliances in Asia, Europe and North America.

**Marshall Aerospace** is upgrading its facilities at its UK headquarters in Cambridge, 40 miles north of London. The planned $10 million expansion includes a new 25,000-sq-ft hangar, FBO and maintenance, repair and overhaul shop and is scheduled to open early next year. The improvements could be a precursor to a European joint venture with Landmark Aviation.

**Arinc Direct** has added extended twin-engine operations (ETOPS) route planning to its portfolio of flight support services for business aircraft. Arinc Direct will provide operators with routes marked in conformance with ETOPS requirements “at no extra cost” to customers.

**Revue Thommen** has announced that its AD32 air-data display with autopilot alerting has been integrated into an RVSM package available for European-registered Hawker Beechcraft King Airs. The EASA issued an STC for the package to U.S.-based Elliott Aviation for installation in King Air 200s, B300s and B330s equipped with certain Rockwell Collins, Bendix/King and Honeywell autopilots. The equipment will be delivered as a complete kit for installation in European-operated aircraft.

**Avfuel** and **Signature Flight Support** announced they will jointly offer Avfuel commercial contract fuel at Signature’s 19 European FBO locations. The pilot refueling incentive program Avtrip will also be made available to eligible customers.

**Snecma** says its Silvercrest 10,000-pound-thrust-class engine is on schedule to run by the end of the year. According to company vice president Jean Pierre Cojan, the first components and subassemblies for the core engine technology demonstrator have been delivered to the company’s Villaroche plant in France. The engine is planned for aircraft in the 45,000- to 80,000-pound mtow range.

**Feras** has upgraded its FBO facility at Vnukovo 3, one of three Moscow airports. The facility is open 24 hours a day and offers satellite television and Internet connections. Feras handles more than one-third of executive flights at the airport and supervises flights at the other two airports, Domodedovo and Sheremetyevo.

**Embraer’s** Legacy 600 has been approved to operate at Cannes-Mandelieu Airport, one of the major gateways to the French Riviera. The approval makes the aircraft the largest business jet authorized to operate from the airport. Located near the center of the city, the airport is engaged in a long-running dispute with local government and community groups with regard to operations.

**Pratt & Whitney Canada** announced the launch of a new customer support center at its Quebec headquarters. The engine maker says the new facility is aimed at delivering an integrated and rapid response service to customers worldwide, bringing together technical support, logistics, service engineering, engine maintenance programs and warranty. The company also announced two new five-year maintenance programs with Colorado-based Air Methods and with UK air ambulance operator AirMed.

**Guggenheim Partners** and **UBS** have formed a corporate jet financing company they say will combine worldwide reach with a streamlined approval process. The new company, Guggenheim Aero Finance, will offer financing solutions to individual and corporate buyers of new and pre-owned business jets. The firm will be led by veteran aviation executives Claude Franco and Bob Peart. Guggenheim Partners oversees more than $125 billion in assets, while UBS is one of the world’s largest financial services firms, overseeing more than $3 trillion.

**Safe Flight** of White Plains, N.Y., was awarded EASA certification for its helicopter powerline detection system for use on the twin-engine Eurocopter AS 355 Eurecru II. The system senses electromagnetic fields radiating from live wires and issues an audio warning which increases in frequency the closer the helicopter gets. Safe Flight is expecting to receive EASA certification for use of the system on the AS 355 as well. ~C.E.

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The Albuquerque, N.M.-based manufacturer cemented its training team at EBACE with Flight Simulation of The Netherlands and Texas-based Higher Power Aviation to provide an FAA-approved training curriculum for the Eclipse 500. Another nascent VLJ racked up a major deal as Hainan Zhong Hong Tai General Aviation Airlines of China signed for 50 **Adam Aircraft** A700s. The sale takes Adam’s order backlog to 377 aircraft. Hainan Zhong Hong Tai General Aviation Airlines plans to sell the A500 and A700 for Adam Aircraft and provide leaseback options to owners for air-taxi operations, following delivery of the A700 next year. Adam hopes to achieve FAA certification for its first jet by the end of the year, with EASA certification to follow soon after.

**Cessna** has already achieved that milestone, making its Mustang the first VLJ to be certified on both sides of the Atlantic. One-third of the 300 Mustangs on order are destined for Europe, and deliveries are expected to begin this summer.

The Mustang and Eclipse 500 are the two aircraft under consideration by ByJets, a new Geneva-based start-up air taxi corporate shuttle service. The company says it will acquire a dozen VLJs next year and intends to add another dozen each year. Since both airframers have large backlogs, ByJets plans to acquire early delivery slots from position holders.
Brazilian manufacturer Embraer announced sales of 11 more Phenom 100s at EBACE. Seven of the aircraft—which is on track for certification next year—are on order by Kansas City, Mo., fractional operator Executive AirShare. Premier Aviation, based in County Kildare, Ireland, signed a contract for the remaining four. Premier plans to use the jets in its fractional share and charter operations.

**Large-scale Luxury**

At the other extreme of the business aviation evolutionary scale, the large-cabin airliner-class jets saw action at EBACE as well. At the start of the show, Boeing announced that it had received orders for seven aircraft since the beginning of the year. Worth nearly $500 million, the orders are for six BBJs and one executive version of the 787-9 Dreamliner. According to Boeing, 44 percent of its non-commercial jet sales are to private individuals.

Cross-Atlantic rival Airbus was represented at EBACE by the airshow debut of the newest and smallest member of the consortium’s ACJ line, the A318 Elite. This aircraft, the first of five Elites ordered by launch customer Minnesota-based Petters Group Worldwide, is designed for 18 passengers. Airbus has more than 20 A318s on order, and since entering the corporate jet market in 1997 has sold 80 from its ACJ stable. U.S. launch customer Minnesota-based Petters Group Worldwide is expecting delivery of the first of six Elites on order next year and expects to take advantage of the Elite’s 3,400-nm range for nonstop transcontinental and transatlantic routes.

To meet the surging demand for its executive jets, Airbus announced the appointment of two additional completion centers in addition to Lufthansa Technik and Jet Aviation in Basel. The airframer has tapped Stork Fokker in The Netherlands and revived its own defunct completions facility located at Airbus’ premises in Toulouse, France, to perform interior completions. The new independently managed company, majority owned by Airbus, will provide the flexibility needed in the executive bizliner market. Initial plans call for the completion of three executive Airbuses at the facility per year.

**Jet Aviation** has also unveiled plans for a $35 million investment program at its Basel, Switzerland completions facility. The program calls for increasing ramp space and constructing a hangar large enough to accommodate an Airbus A380 and Boeing 787 simultaneously. The expansion will more than double its existing 248,000 sq ft of covered space and by next year will increase the completion shop’s annual capacity to 20 Dassault Falcons and six airliners.

The company just completed and delivered its second executive 747-400 for the Dubai Air Wing, completing a contract it was awarded in 2004.

**Dealing the Cards**

The jet card concept seems to have established itself firmly in Europe. Geneva-based PrivatAir announced it has taken $10 million in deposits for its Select jet card. According to chief executive Greg Thomas, “We believe it’s the perfect product for Europe, and we think the rest of the year will show some interesting developments in that field. We have been through two renewal cycles without spending any money on marketing and we’ve used it as a pilot program to understand how to manage deadheads and other issues.” PrivatAir’s program is in addition to the company’s Corporate Helicard, which was introduced last year and allows clients to purchase discounted block charter rates for helicopter flights.

Air Partner is reporting a surge in business. Over a period of six months ending in January, the UK-based company saw its client base increase by 25 percent. Compared with the same period last year, sales grew by 60 percent while operating profit increased by 139 percent to £6.3 million. The company recently rebranded itself into two business units, including Air Partner Private Jets, which handles its new Jet Card division.