Aircraft offer value the market can’t refuse

This is the healthiest market for new turboprops in years. In 2008, the last year before the global economy completely shed its wheels, members of the General Aviation Manufacturers Association delivered 538 turboprop aircraft before experiencing a steady decline in those figures in the following years. Last year shipments of turboprops bounced back with vigor to a record 645 aircraft and there is no shortage of new single- and even some new twin-engine models on the horizon.

Meanwhile, the used turboprop market has firmed substantially, with the fleet percentages for most models on the markets showing only single-digit availability and high pricing as a result. According to the aircraft pricing service Vref, a 1985 Cessna Caravan models on the markets showing only single-digit availability and high pricing as a result. According to the aircraft pricing service Vref, a 1985 Cessna Caravan trades for an astonishing 93 percent of its new price; a 1981 Cessna Conquest II twin even higher at 99 percent of new; a 1991 TBM700, 85 percent of new; a 2008 TBM850, 81 percent of new; a 2009 Piper Meridian 75 percent of new; and a 1990 Pilatus PC-12, 74 percent of new.

This kind of used pricing makes new turboprops all the more attractive. U.S. turboprop manufacturers dominate the market with a better than 80-percent share and most of this output is for the export market, which seems to have a better understanding of a turboprop’s value, especially unpressurized singles such as the Cessna Caravan and Quest Kodiak that can operate from unimproved runways.

What once were almost exclusively civilian turboprops are being pressed into military service by cost-conscious nations, also driving demand. Last year the United Arab Emirates (UAE) unveiled an armed Cessna Caravan and Air Tractor 802 crop duster at the Dubai airshow.

While U.S. manufacturers likely will dominate the turboprop market for some years to come, the rising dollar, pushing through four-year highs against a basket of international currencies that includes the euro, could make competing foreign products such as the simple single Mahindra/Gipps Airvan 10 much more attractive on price to some buyers and jump start programs such as the speedy Avic Primus 150 single in China.

One thing is certain: as energy prices remain firm at current levels, the airlines are rediscovering the value of turboprops—nothing hauls as much efficiently on short hops—and so is general aviation.

**Singles**

*Daher-Socata TBM900*

The latest iteration of the TBM was developed and certified in secret over the last three years and delivered to its launch customer this past March. The $3.7 million 900 is distinct from its predecessors with a new Hartzell composite propeller with five dramatically swept blades and a redesigned spinner, winglets, new engine exhaust stacks and a subtly different engine air intake that has a slight twist. It is mainly the new propeller that helps give the TBM a higher top speed of 330 knots, reduces standard-day sea-level takeoff distance by more than 20 percent, improves climb rates (18 minutes to the 31,000-foot certified ceiling) and boosts range to 1,730 nm (45-minute reserve). At cruise altitude the Pratt & Whitney Canada P&W PT6A-66D burns 37 gph and a new torque limiter enables the use of 850 shp for takeoff.

Minor changes also have been made to the cowling airflow, landing-gear doors (bigger and more aerodynamic), wings, dorsal fin and empennage—all designed to wring the last bit of aerodynamic efficiency from the airplane. A new strake on the left lower forward fuselage a few feet in front of the wing leading edge gives the airplane better stall manners.

Numerous improvements have been made to the cockpit. A simplified, single power lever replaces the throttle and propeller controls and the condition lever and reduces pilot workload.

The lever operates in a classic H gate pattern reminiscent of stick-shift Ferraris: the left side is the thrust mode for taxi and flight and the right side is condition mode for start and cutoff. In condition mode the propeller is automatically feathered. Other cockpit refinements include more buttons and switches and a remote FMS control panel. Starting is easier thanks to a new 300-amp generator that accelerates the sequence and automatically switches off at 50-percent Ng, and all external lights are now LEDs. The company holds orders for more than 40 of the aircraft.

**Mahindra/Gipps Airvan 10**

Developed from the boxy metal piston-powered Airvan 8, this $1.3 million unpressurized turboprop single is powered by a 450-shp Rolls-Royce 250-B17 driving a Hartzell HC-D3F-7 three-blade propeller. It features a 50-inch-wide sliding aft cargo door. It has a full-fuel payload of 1,400 pounds (useful load 2,250 pounds, standard fuel capacity 153 gallons), a range of 550 nm with IFR reserves and a cruising speed of 205 knots.

The takeoff roll is 1,100 feet (1,600 over a 50-foot obstacle), giving this aircraft true STOL capability.

The flat floor of the Airvan 10 main cabin can be configured for diverse missions, including patrol/reconnaissance/surveillance, medevac, skydiving, freight and commuter operations. The cabin (50 inches wide, 45 inches tall and 16 feet, one inch long) can be configured for 10 passengers (nine in the cabin and one in the copilot seat) and still offer 32 cu ft...
of cargo space in the rear cabin. An optional cargo pod (600 pounds maximum capacity) can also be fitted to the aircraft, and the option of amphibious floats is anticipated. At this point the program is several years behind schedule, but this summer representatives from Mahindra told AIN they expect certification next year.

The aircraft will be built at the Gipps Latrobe factory in Victoria, Australia. India’s Mahindra Aerospace bought Australia-based GippsAero in 2009. Earlier this year Mahindra rebranded the Gipps GA8 (piston) and GA10 the Mahindra Aerospace Airvan 8 and Airvan 10 and unveiled a new company logo. “The new logo and naming are closely aligned with Mahindra’s brand identity, encompassing both aircraft and component manufacturer for Indian and global markets,” said Arvind Mehra, executive director and global CEO of Mahindra Aerospace. “The new identity combines the Airvan name with the numbers 8 and 10, signifying seat capacity,” he said. The Mahindra Group is a $16.5 billion company employing 180,000 in more than 100 countries.

Epic E1000

Epic continues its campaign to develop a certified version of the $1.95 million LT kitplane. More than 46 of those have been delivered, but Epic has decided to exit the kit business and focus its efforts on producing certified aircraft. The $2.75 million, 325-knot E1000 features carbon-fiber construction and Garmin G1000 avionics and is powered by a Pratt & Whitney Canada PT6A-67A (1,200 shp, flat-rated from 1,825 shp) turning a Hartzell four-blade propeller. The E1000 has a range of 1,625 nm (at 265 ktas economic cruise), 1,120-pound payload, and a 34,000-foot ceiling. Time to climb is 15 minutes and the maximum rate is 4,000 fpm. The cabin seats six and measures 15 feet long, 4.6 feet wide and 4.9 feet high. Mtw is 7,500 pounds. Takeoff distance is 1,600 feet; landing distance is 1,840 feet (over a 50-foot obstacle).

The company had said it planned to fly two conformal test aircraft last year, but that goal appears to have slipped. Earlier this year it said it was building parts for its conformal aircraft and was hiring additional staff at its facility in Bend, Oregon, and that certification remained on track for 2015. Epic’s order book for 35 aircraft seems to have been generated largely by the 25 destined for its parent company, Engineering LLC, a Russian MRO that bought the company in 2012.

Kestrel K-350

The future of this program hinges on obtaining additional investment. To date the company has received support in the form of various government grants, loans and tax credits, and some of these have been renegotiated recently, while the company pursues more private equity. The engineering work is largely complete, some parts have been fabricated, and the engine/prop/cowl has run on a test stand. The aircraft today bears little detailed resemblance to the original Kestrel JP10, which first flew in 2006 and was developed by the now-defunct Farnborough Aircraft.

Major suppliers for the K-350 have already been selected. They include Garmin for the G3000 touchscreen avionics system and Honeywell for the TPE331-14GR engine, flat-rated to 1,000 shp and providing a 5,000-hour TBO. The aircraft features a four-to-five-seat executive interior on par with those of modern corporate jets, including high-gloss wood veneers, upscale leather, a wide aisle and oversized oval cabin windows reminiscent of a Gulfstream. It is just one of nine interiors Kestrel is developing, with passenger seating for five to nine people. The others will accommodate missions as diverse as medevac, cargo and a high-density configuration for eight passengers. The cockpit features sidestick controls, a low, contoured instrument panel with large flat-panel displays and a wraparound windshield allowing views of both wingtips.

Kestrel has not released a price for the aircraft but it is expected to be in the neighborhood of $3 million. Preliminary specifications include a maximum cruise speed of at least 320 ktas; 1,300 nm range (pilot, five passengers, maximum cruise speed at 31,000 feet and NBAA IFR reserves with 100-nm turnaround), 8,500 pounds mtow. The Kodiak is powered by the 850-shp GE H85. The aircraft features Garmin G1000 avionics.

Extra 500

Extra Aircraft’s long-troubled attempt to manufacture and market this light turboprop single got a shot in the arm when the program was sold in May to China’s Jiangsu A-Star Aviation Industry. Extra had been trying to set up a U.S.-based manufacturing plant and gain FAA certification. The 500 is now in EASA approval in 2006. Under terms of the sale, parts for the aircraft will be fabricated by Jiangsu and then shipped for assembly at Extra’s factory in Dinslaken, Germany, through 2016. After that, production of the entire aircraft likely will move to China. Jiangsu is located in Zhenjiang in China’s Jiangsu Province.

The all-composite six-seat 500 is powered by the 450-shp Rolls-Royce 250-B17F/2, cruises at 226 knots, and has range of 1,600 nm and a service ceiling of 25,000 feet. The cockpit can be fitted with the Avidyne Integra R9 avionics system. (EASA approved that installation in 2011.) The last listed price for the 500 was $1.75 million.

Avic/Caiga Primus 150

China’s state-run general aviation company made two big moves into GA: buying the design rights to the old Epic Aircraft designs and acquiring composite lightplane maker Cirrus in 2011. Apparently it went school fast, unveiling a mockup for a five-seat fast single in late 2012. The all-composite, $1.24 million Primus 150, with styling more than just a little similar to the old Epic Escape, is aiming for a maximum cruise speed of 352 knots (identical to the Escape), a range of 1,410 nm and a ceiling of 28,000 feet. Power comes from the 850-shp GE H85. The aircraft made its first flight over the summer and deliveries could begin as early as next year; however, at this time the order book appears slim, with signatures for only eight aircraft.

Quest Kodiak with Summit Option

While this rugged little beast has been around for a few years, 2014 is the first time you can get it with an executive interior. Now you can visit all those places it just shouldn’t go–and do it in comfort. With the executive Summit interior, the Kodiak has room for five passengers (with one pilot); more6 utilitarian layouts accommodate eight to nine people.

You’re not going to confuse this with the vocation of a Gulfstream. You have two color choices: beige and gray. Nevertheless, the interior is comfortable and functional. The executive interior provides seats that recline, some cabinetry and sidewall tables. The seats are detachable and all manner of plywood sheets, motorcycles and so on can be loaded aboard through the giant 49.25-inch by 49.25-inch left-hand aft cargo door. Aft of the pilot seats, the Kodiak’s cabin yields an impressive 248 cu ft of volume, and the optional cargo pod expands that by another 63 cu ft.

The basic airplane costs $1.975 million. Add air conditioning, supplemental oxygen—the airplane is not pressurized—the underbelly cargo pod, the executive interior, anti-icing protection and some goodies in the avionics panel and the price tag is right around $2.4 million. The Kodiak is powered by the 750-shp Pratt & Whitney Canada PT6A-34, which has a TBO of 4,000 hours. The airplane features Garmin G1000 avionics.

Beechcraft PD434

Before it was acquired by Textron earlier this year, Beechcraft had announced plans for a new line of turboprops, including one code-named PD434, believed to be a single-engine design combining the all-composite PD434, believed to be a single-engine design combining the all-composite Design Research Center in Dinslaken, Germany, through 2016. After that, production of the entire aircraft likely will move to China. Jiangsu is located in Zhenjiang in China’s Jiangsu Province.

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PC-12NG. The preliminary concept includes seating configurations for nine to 11 (including the pilot). Cabin dimensions: 5.5 feet wide, 5.4 feet high and 20.4 feet long. The NBAA IFR range with four passengers would be 1,750 nm and high-speed cruise 302 knots at FL250. The airplane would have a max payload of 2,800 pounds and a full-fuel payload of 1,650 pounds.

In the wake of the Textron takeover, the status of this program is unclear, with Textron Aviation executives making bland but cryptic comments about any new programs needing to justify themselves. Consider the recent remarks of Christi Tannahill, Beechcraft vice president: “This is a market space that continues to grow, and we will continue to look at the single-engine turboprop market and evaluate if that’s a space we want to be in.”

Cessna Concept Single

In July 2012 Cessna unveiled a research cabin mockup for a design slightly larger than the Piper Meridian, which has said little since. As this sector increases increasingly crowded, and Cessna CEO Scott Ernest continues his campaign for each member of the company product line to defend itself on profitability, Cessna’s entry into this sector seems questionable at best.

The concept had all-composite construction, retractable landing gear, a wingspan of 42 feet, sidestick controls and seating for seven in a cabin measuring 53 inches tall, 54 inches wide and 17 feet, 8 inches long. Target price is $2.1- to $2.4 million. Cessna had several mock-up configurations to choose from and we will continue to look at the single-engine turboprop market and evaluate if that’s a space we want to be in.”

Twin Props

Beechcraft King Air C90GTx and 250 Get Upgrades (Factory and Retrofit)

Beechcraft will make the new Raisbeck Hartzell-blade propeller and Raisbeck aft body strakes standard on new production C90GTx beginning in the fourth quarter of this year. Raisbeck introduced the new configurations last year for all C90 and E90 King Airs last year. The four blades have 30-degree sweep and give the new propeller a diameter of 96 inches—six inches more than the original.

The new props shorten the C90GTx’s takeoff roll by 600 feet, to 1,984 feet, and its landing roll by 10 percent over a 50-foot obstacle, to 2,160 feet (1,580 feet with props in reverse). The new props also allow an rpm reduction for cruise power settings to 1750 rpm, cutting cabin noise by 1.6 dBA to 74.6 dBA, a level found in most new luxury automobiles. Beechcraft is making other improvements to the C90GTx, including a new high-speed nosegear tire and updates to the Collins Pro Line 21 flight displays.

Beechcraft is making the CenTex Aerospace Halo 250 increased gross weight (IGW) STC standard on all new-production King Air 250s. The modification raises mtow to 13,420 pounds from 12,500 pounds, taking full-fuel payload to 1,025 pounds from its current 155 pounds. King Air 250s with this option are certified in the commuter category, carry additional safety systems such as engine fire extinguisher and illuminated escape path floor markings. A BE-200 type rating is required to operate airplanes in the commuter category.

The IGW STC is an aftermarket option for in-service King Air 250s and available through Textron Aviation’s factory-owned service centers. It is also available through CenTex for all 200-series King Airs. The conversion also raises MGO, with the maximum operating Mach number climbing to Mach 0.58 from 0.52. (MGO remains unchanged on King Air 200Ts and B200Ts.) It allows faster cruise speeds at high altitudes and faster descents. The increased gross weight also translates into more passenger, baggage and fuel capacity. When used for fuel alone, it adds 90 minutes of endurance to a typical 200-series King Air.

Nextant G90XT

The company that remanufactures the Beechjet has now turned its sights to remaking Beechcraft C90-series King Airs. A firm price has not been set but is expected to be in the $2.2 million plus range, consistent with Nextant’s goal of having the remanufactured aircraft come in at roughly half the price of a new model. The Nextant G90XT will feature winglets, Garmin G1000 glass-panel avionics and GE H75 engines (750 shp, 4,000-hour or 8,000-cycle TBO with no hot section or fuel nozzle inspections required) mated to a propeller gear box that turns more slowly to yield reduced cabin noise and greater engine efficiency in cruise. Nextant says, both Garmin and GE already have STCs for retrofit and Nextant will integrate them with other changes to the airframe. Nextant received its first H75s over the summer and plans to fly them on the aircraft this fall. Shortly thereafter, the company plans to release performance numbers. Customer deliveries are expected next year.

The cockpit of the G90XT will be substantially different from a typical G1000 retrofit in a King Air. The instrument panel is trimmed in carbon fiber. It includes a three-screen layout with a backup Mid-Continent Instruments standby attitude module and a Luna Technologies LED glareshield warning panel. The flight deck features Unison’s simplified, single-lever control of engine power and prop speed and has in-flight torque- and temperature-limit protection, auto-start and engine-trend monitoring capabilities. The fuel-system controls are now mounted above the power levers, replacing pressurization switches that are no longer needed because the pressurization system is digitally integrated into the G1000 system.

Standard cabin configurations offered include special mission/air ambulance, a high-density five-passenger layout and an executive three-seat configuration. More than 1,500 C90s have been built, and Nextant believes an abundance of those are suitable for the program.

Piaggio Avanti Evo

Piaggio’s long-promised improvements for the Avanti II have finally materialized in the form of the $7.4 million Avanti Evo. Deliveries of the refreshed aircraft could begin by year-end. The improved aircraft features winglets, anti-skid carbon brakes, digital steering, redesigned engine inlets, a reshaped “front wing” and a new five-blade Hartzell scimitar propeller that will dramatically cut the twin pusher’s notorious external noise signature by 68 percent (5dB) and give it a less obnoxious pitch. The changes also improve the Avanti’s performance: maximum range is up by 17 percent, to 1,720 nm, and time to climb is down by 3 percent, as are emissions. Short-field and steep approach capabilities are maintained, as is the type’s 41,000-foot ceiling and 402-knot top speed.

The cockpit and cabin interior also have been improved. Cockpits now support electronic flight bags. The Rockwell Collins Pro Line 21 avionics are retained. The passenger cabin has been redesigned with new Iacobucci seats and a fresh finish from Poltrano Frau as well as a new environmental control system and LED lighting. Five configurations are now available with seating for up to nine (six to seven in executive configurations) in the 375-cu-ft cabin. The new propellers help reduce cabin noise by 20 percent.

Piaggio is also moving to bring more reliability to its product support by instituting a new Parts Total Care hourly lifecycle parts program at the starting rate of $235 per flight hour.

Behind the scenes there have been some important changes at Piaggio Aero over the last year. Mubadala Aerospace, an Abu Dhabi government-owned entity that has been a shareholder in Piaggio since 2006, took full control of the company earlier this year, following a broad-based restructuring of Piaggio Aero last year. As part of the restructuring, India’s Tata Industries relinquished its partnership stake in Piaggio, giving Mubadala control of 98 percent of the company’s stock. It is well known that executives from Mubadala and Tata clashed over business strategies for Piaggio, pushing the company’s ability to move forward.

Carlo Logli, the former CEO of SuperJet International who was brought in to reorganize Piaggio, became the company’s new CEO. Logli’s first move will be to close Piaggio’s antiquated manufacturing plants in Genoa and Finale Ligure and consolidate operations at a new $180 million facility at Villanova d’Albenga Airport, 50 miles southwest of Genoa. Logli said he plans to implement modern industrialization techniques at the new plant, including cellular manufacturing.

He also hopes to land more defense business for Piaggio, leveraging the Evo into two military variants, the unmanned Piaggio Hammerhead extended-range surveillance aircraft and the MPA, or maritime patrol aircraft. Logli said deliveries of each are scheduled for next year and 2016, respectively. Meanwhile the Evo received a launch order from Hong Kong-based Bravia Capital for 10 aircraft options on another 40. The first Evos are slated for delivery by year-end.
Evektor EV-55 Outback

Certification for the Outback has slid another two years, this time to 2017. This $2.1 million light twin from the Czech Republic has been in development for more than a decade and first flew in 2011. By the summer of this year it had logged just 135 hours. A second test aircraft, a production-conforming prototype, could fly later this year. However, the order book to date appears anemic and the flight-test program is being conducted at a leisurely schedule, perhaps a reflection that it is a largely public-sector project. Evektor claims international orders for two dozen of its military/utility/cargo/comb/passenger aircraft, which seats between nine and 14 people. The project is being underwritten by the Czech ministry of industry and is receiving technical assistance from the Czech air force. The aircraft is designed for high-altitude operations at unpaved airstrips. Evektor claims interest from several air forces and is marketing the aircraft to entities currently flying Cessna 402/404 piston twins and Antonov An-2 single-radia biplanes. The Outback features a quick-change cabin that can be reconfigured in 20 minutes. Power comes from a pair of P&W PT6A-21s rated at 536 shp each. Maximum speed at 10,000 feet is 220 knots and maximum payload is 4,021 pounds. Service ceiling is 29,000 feet. The volume of the combined cargo/passenger area is 447 cu ft and the maximum cargo payload is 3,021 pounds. Evektor claims the Outback can take off from, and land on, runways of less than 1,700 feet at 6,500-foot elevation. Evektor has selected Esterline’s CMC SmartDeck as standard equipment.

NAL Saras

India may be able to place a satellite in orbit around Mars, but when it comes to something more mundane—like building a turboprop on any kind of rational schedule—well, not so much. The country’s new prime minister, Narendra Modi, seems dedicated to flying high and would be a good place to start. Now in its 23rd year of development, the twin-pusher NAL Saras could be back in the air “any day now,” a spokesman for India’s National Aerospace Laboratory said in August. Indeed, a third prototype—the first was severely overweight and the second crashed in 2009—was spotted taxi testing over the summer. There is little chance this aircraft will find a commercial market and NAL in as much admitted it two years ago when it announced that the Saras program will not subject itself to the civil certification process and that the airplane’s lone customer, the Indian Air Force (IAF), currently with an order for 15 aircraft, might even opt to reject the final product as costs have ballooned and a new Saras is thought to cost more than $23 million. As currently configured, the Saras is powered by two Pratt & Whitney Canada PT6A-67As (1,200 shp each) spinning composite five-blade constant-speed MT propellers. Cruise speed is 280 knots. Mtow is 15,633 pounds and useful load is 2,710 pounds. Service ceiling is 30,000 feet and the climb rate is 2,000 fpm. The Saras is designed to operate from 3,000-foot runways and can be configured to carry up to 14 passengers. NAL is using the lessons learned from the Saras program to develop a 70- to 90-passenger regional turboprop by 2020.

Avic Aircar

A lookalike to the discontinued Dornier 328 twin and an update of the Chinese YF-12, the Aircar premiered in 2011 and was initially available in a 19-seat commuter configuration. Avic has recently begun promoting the aircraft with an executive interior. Power comes from a pair of P&W PT6A-65Bs (1,100 shp each). The cockpit hosts Honeywell’s Apex avionics. The Aircar is designed for the short haul: 230-knot fast cruise speed and a seats-full range of 700 nm.

Dornier SeaStar CD-2

Plans to build this $6 million, certified, push-pull, all-composite amphibian in Quebec appear to have sunk, and the lone flying prototype has returned to the Dornier family in Germany, who underwrote its $150 million design/certification costs in the 1980s and 1990s. A family spokesman said last year that production would not begin without full funding in place and that Dornier continued to seek manufacturing and/or investment partners for the program for a needed infusion of up to $100 million. However, the marketing campaign appears to continue in some form. Earlier this year, Hellenic Seaplanes announced plans to add the CD-2 to its fleet serving the Greek Islands. The 180-knot, 10,000-pound Seastar is powered by a pair of 650-shp P&W PT6A-135s. Interiors for the unpressurized cabin range from six-seat executive layout to a 12-seat high-density configuration.

Turbo Mallard

Frakes Aviation is contemplating putting the Grumman Widgeon, Goose and Mallard amphibians back into production with P&W PT6A power—the 715-shp—34 already STC approved for the aircraft or some other dash number. Frakes owns Mallard Aviation, the entity that owns the type certificates to the aircraft. It’s still in the discussion phase with investors and manufacturing partners. If the project goes ahead, new aircraft could enter production next year.

Mahindra/Gips Airvan18

Mahindra is working on an updated version of the classic Government Aircraft Factories N24 Nomad twin, initially rebadged as the GA18 and now the Airvan 18. Mahindra hopes to bring the aircraft to market next year. Plans for the aircraft include an 18-passenger layout with quick-change options among passenger, cargo and combi. The Airvan 18 will be powered by a pair of upgraded 450-shp Rolls-Royce C250-series engines and receive new propellers and a modern glass cockpit, while retaining its historic STOL capabilities, easily using runways shorter than 2,000 feet. Maximum cruise speed is 173 knots and range is 1,080 nm with 2,190 pounds of payload. Maximum useful load is 4,405 pounds, with an Mtow of 9,400 pounds. The Airvan 18 will be manufactured at Gips’ main complex in Victoria, Australia.

New Retrofit Programs

• Blackhawk Cessna Caravan

Engine modification firm Blackhawk announced a new program for Cessna Caravan owners earlier this year. The company is certifying the B67-shp PT6A-140 as a direct aftermarket replacement for the standard 600-shp PT6A-114 or the 675-shp PT6A-114A in these aircraft. Blackhawk said -140 engine customers can expect significant increases in climb performance, cruise speeds, takeoff distances and operations in icing conditions. Deliveries will begin in next year’s first quarter.

Mahindra/Gips Airvan18

Turbo Mallard

Avic Aircar

Dornier SeaStar CD-2

Evektor EV-55 Outback

NAL Saras