

Blue-sky thinking

A fresh wave of aircraft is opening up new options for air travel, finds Samantha Mayling



It pays to plan ahead, but unless you've got a crystal ball tucked away, peering into the future is fraught with uncertainty.

That's why plane-spotters had their gaze firmly fixed on last month's Dubai Airshow, a key event in the aviation calendar, to get a glimpse into the future of flying.

Not only are new-generation aircraft heralding better fuel efficiency and a more pleasant flying experience – making long-haul travel a more enticing prospect – but they also bring new destinations within reach.

PLANE SPEAKING

Manufacturers were at the Dubai Airshow touting their latest long-haul airliners, such as Airbus's A350 XWB (Extra Wide Body) and Boeing's 787-9 Dreamliner.

The A350's launch customer was Qatar Airways, which uses the aircraft on routes from Doha to Singapore, Frankfurt, Munich and, starting in 2016, to Philadelphia, Boston and Adelaide.

The second airline to fly the A350 was Vietnam Airlines (Hanoi-Paris). Since it also introduced 787-9 Dreamliner flights from Heathrow in September, the airline claims to be the first Asian carrier to operate Boeing and Airbus's next-generation aircraft at the same time.

Finnair is the first European airline to receive the A350, while next year, Ethiopian Airlines will be the first African carrier next year.

Pekka Vauramo, Finnair chief executive, says: "This aircraft is the future of flying and will give our passengers a completely new and enhanced travel experience."

That's a view supported,

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unsurprisingly, by Fabrice Brégier, Airbus's president and chief executive. He says: "The A350 XWB's unrivalled fuel efficiency and passenger comfort make it the perfect aircraft to spearhead Finnair's Asian expansion."

British Airways parent International Airlines Group is following suit, ordering A350s to modernise Iberia's fleet and open up new long-haul routes.

However, the outlook for Airbus's 10-year-old A380 'super jumbo' double-decker is less clear, as airlines look to smaller planes that can now cope with longer flights.

The biggest A380 customer is Emirates, which unveiled its two-class aircraft at the show, scrapping first class to expand economy and create the largest-ever passenger aircraft, with 58 business-class seats and 557 in economy.

DREAM ON

Rather than double-decker aircraft, Boeing put its efforts into the Dreamliner. While the A380 was dubbed the 'congestion buster' – packing more passengers on to hub routes – the smaller 787 is the 'hub buster', offering more connections on less busy routes.

With a longer fuselage, the latest version – the 787-



LEFT:
Norwegian
Dreamliner 787

RIGHT: Finnair
A350 XWB

BELOW:
Sri Lanka



➔ 9 – flies 53 more passengers than the 787-8. Low-cost carrier Norwegian has been most enthusiastic in welcoming the new aircraft, placing the largest single order of any European airline, adding to its eight 787-8s. The unveiling of its Norwegian UK subsidiary last month hints at the strategy behind the move, paving the way for further UK expansion and potential new routes to Asia, South America and South Africa in 2016. When those 19 new 787-9 Dreamliners start arriving in 2017, it can launch yet more long-haul routes.

Thomas Ramdahl, Norwegian commercial director, says: “Our fleet of Dreamliners has been a game-changer, helping us achieve success in low-

cost transatlantic travel where many have failed before.

“Puerto Rico launched in November – our fifth long-haul route to launch from Gatwick in just 18 months. It will be followed by the launch of Boston next May.”

▶ MOVING ON UP

The spacious 787-9 gave BA an opportunity to install First suites – the first European airline to do so – and it began flying the 787-9 to Delhi in October, soon to be followed by Abu Dhabi, Muscat, Austin, Kuala Lumpur and San Jose, California.

Fellow trendsetter Thomson Airways – the first UK operator to introduce the Dreamliner, in 2013 – shows no signs of slowing down either, with plans to increase its fleet to 13 next year. That includes up to four 787-9s, allowing Thomson to expand its long-haul range and add Stansted departures.

These new aircraft will be used on Thomson Airways’ most popular long-haul routes – including Mexico’s Caribbean coast, Sanford in Florida and Jamaica – but Thomson promises “exciting new destinations” in

the future, as the 787-9s have a longer range than the original 787-8 fleet.

The headline-grabber for Thomson was its announcement of Gatwick-Sri Lanka Dreamliner services from winter 2016. The news was accompanied by Thomson research showing people are willing to fly further: 77% of those polled were happy to travel nine hours or more to reach their ‘dream destination’, and one in three said new aircraft such as the Dreamliner inspired them to go farther afield.

The operator has reported 350% growth in long-haul customers over the past 10 years. It has added Mauritius, Mexico’s Pacific coast and Cuba, but is eyeing Vietnam and Cambodia, as well as Caribbean islands such as Antigua, Barbados and Saint Lucia.

▶ PUBLIC OPINION

There has been such a buzz around the Dreamliner that it’s become a real selling point with clients. Ken McLeod, Advantage Travel Partnership corporate director, says: “Customers do actually want to travel on aircraft such as the Dreamliner because

there has been lots of publicity.

“And airlines and charter companies have the confidence to open up new destinations as they are economically viable. The cost of travel is relatively cheap nowadays and people want to go to new places for new experiences.”

BA used the Dreamliner to launch routes such as Heathrow-Austin and increase frequencies to existing markets such as Chengdu, while Virgin Atlantic introduced the B787 Dreamliner on routes including New York, Boston, Los Angeles, Delhi and Shanghai.

Qatar Airways will start a Birmingham-Doha Dreamliner service in March, and United Airlines is introducing it on Heathrow-LA on April 6, in addition to its Heathrow-Houston service.

Also flying Dreamliners to the UK are ➔

→ Aeromexico, Air India, Ethiopian Airlines, China Southern Airlines, Kenya Airways, Royal Brunei Airlines and Royal Jordanian.

THE LONG GAME

Qantas could break the record for the world's longest flight in 2017, as it considers previously unheard-of non-stop routes such as Perth-London, using the eight 787-9 aircraft it has ordered to replace its 747s.

An even longer route could start in 2018, as Singapore Airlines plans to fly direct from Singapore to the US, becoming the launch customer for an ultra-long-range variant of the A350.

With fuel prices relatively low, the trend for ultra-long-haul aircraft could result in longer non-stop flights becoming more economically viable. New technology in A350s and B787s makes the passenger experience more endurable, but there's still

a question mark over whether travellers want to spend 19 hours travelling non-stop.

MIDDLE MEN

While there are big changes afoot in the long-haul market, the Dubai Airshow also showcased new mid-haul single-aisle aircraft, such as the Airbus A320neo (new engine option) and Boeing 737 MAX.

The A320neo claims to offer the lowest operating costs of any single-aisle aircraft thanks to cabin innovations, latest engine technologies and overall efficiency improvements.

International Airlines Group confirmed orders for 15 A320neos, praising the cost savings and environmental benefits of the fuel-efficient aircraft.

The 737 MAX-8 – described as Boeing's answer to the A320neo – took a 75-strong order from India's Jet Airways, and 100 from



ABOVE: British Airways' A320neo

Norwegian, the first European carrier to place an order.

Norwegian's Ramdahl, says: "We will start taking delivery in 2017, unlocking huge opportunities for new routes between the East Coast of America and Europe."

"At present, Norwegian operates flights to and from Gatwick, Manchester, Edinburgh and Birmingham, so these would naturally be the first destinations

to consider operating from. But no firm decisions have been made at this early stage."

Other 737 MAX customers include United Airlines, Ryanair, Icelandair and Turkish Airlines. One of the most exciting prospects is Thomson Airways, which plans onboard innovations such as family booths and duo-seating as it takes delivery of 47 737 MAX aircraft by 2020. TW



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Bangkok Airways United Kingdom
 Aviareps House, Gatwick Road Crawley, West Sussex RH10 9RB / England
 Tel. +44 (0) 1293 596 626 E-mail : bangkokairways@aviareps-group.com
www.bangkokair.com



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