

AIRBORNE

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The NBAA view - "The future of business aviation has never looked brighter"

Ed Bolen, President and CEO of the National Business Aviation Association (NBAA), is a serial optimist. His opening message at the group's White Plains Regional Forum was: "The future of business aviation has never looked brighter."

Bolen's reasons for optimism are wide-ranging and numerous. In terms of numbers, bizav operations continue to increase as the industry recovers from the pandemic. The sector has seen a large number of first time users of bizav, attracted by the risk advantages over commercial airports. A large proportion of those new users are staying loyal, further widening the bizav client base.

Bolen also pointed to the neat dovetail between business aviation and advanced air mobility (AAM) – with the potential use of such craft to feed the on-demand nature of business aviation. The challenge of embracing sustainable fuels and technologies will also provide bizav with an injection of innovation and personnel.

Covid travel restrictions to last for two years

Some form of international travel restrictions due to Covid-19 are likely to be in place for the next two years, according to Justin Lancaster, Group Commercial Director of leading air charter broker Air Charter Service (ACS), which provides an online travel restrictions guide that is updated with data from individual governments and the International Air Transport Association (IATA). "The current number of countries imposing restrictions is still very high, and they range from closed borders to vaccination checks and testing requirements," he said. "Based on the analysis of data sources and information we have monitored since its launch in 2020, as well as current travel trends, we do not expect the situations to completely normalise within the next couple of years." Conflicting factors influencing this timeframe include the negative impact of emerging Covid variants in forcing more draconian restrictions to the desire of governments to reopen their economies at pace to cater for mass tourism.

Ukraine and the impact on sanctioned aircraft

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created unprecedented risk for large parts of the business aviation sector. The US, EU, UK and many other countries have imposed similar but not necessarily identical sanctions on Russia and are actively looking to seize property owned by sanctioned individuals and entities. It is estimated that more than 400 corporate jets are or were owned by Russian nationals and there are a growing number of impounded aircraft sitting at European airports. A number of these aircraft have been de-registered by registries in compliance with sanctions, others have been repossessed by lessors. One of the principal difficulties is that many aircraft are now in effective limbo and cannot be moved or legitimately sold. Some aircraft with links to Russia were undergoing maintenance when the conflict began, but EU and UK sanctions prohibit the provision of maintenance or technical support for aircraft owned or operated by Russian nationals. A number of MROs have therefore had to cease all work including preservation maintenance.

Bizav traffic still exceeding 2019 levels

Global business aviation traffic levels continue to exceed the pre-pandemic benchmark according to the latest data from specialist analyst WingX Advance. The first half of 2022 saw bizjet activity up 21% over 2019 levels and 27% on the same period last year. By comparison, commercial airline traffic remains nearly 30% down on pre-pandemic levels. It is fair to say that rebound is beginning to slow – particularly in North America – but the overall pace of growth remains consistently 20% above that of previous years.

European bizav traffic continues to show strong growth. H1 numbers (almost 300,000 sectors) shows a 38% increase over 2021 and a 17% uplift over 2019. H2 performance is likely to be stronger still, fuelled by summer leisure demand on top of a number of events for which business aviation demand is high. Milan Design Week, for example, saw an average of 160 daily bizav movements – an increase of 75% over the 2021 event. Similarly, airports on the Cote d'Azur, including Cannes and Nice, saw a 56% increase in traffic in May driven both by the Cannes Film Festival and the Monaco Grand Prix.

In North America, the figures reflect a weakening in demand – bizjet traffic levels in June were up by just 7% over the previous year, although the figures are 21% up on June 2019. Overall figures for H1 are 20% higher than the same period pre-pandemic.

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Aviation insurance

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'Ramp envy' driving VistaJet's growing Global 7500 fleet

"There is ramp envy in this market, and we need to ensure that we are staying up to date with the latest aircraft," said Ian Moore, Chief Commercial Officer of Malta-based specialist programme and on-demand charter operator VistaJet. As evidence of this, the company will accept a further seven Global 7500s by the end of the year, adding to the ten examples already in service. The operator of the world's largest fleet of Bombardier's flagship will also take delivery of a further three Challenger 350s by year end. Commentators believe the operator will be keen to look at the new longer range Global 8000 to entrench its position in this niche market. It may also look to retrofit some or all of its existing 7500 fleet to 8000 standard.

'Air force One' replacement update

Considerable pressures remain in terms of both time and cost to the programme to replace the two aging Boeing 747-200 aircraft currently used for US presidential transport and designated as 'Air Force One' when the POTUS is aboard. According to a report by the US Government Accountability Office (GAO), the project to replace the aircraft with two Boeing 747-8 airliners is currently running more than two years late with a budget over-run of USD1.2 billion, much of which will be absorbed by the manufacturer. Considerable challenges remain, not least the complete re-wiring of each aircraft. The unit cost of each aircraft has risen to USD2.6 billion, with 20% of those costs relating to software. The aircraft are not expected to enter service until 2025 at the earliest.

OEM backlogs remain 'robust'

Business aviation OEM backlogs are now extending at least through 2023 and in most cases into 2024 and 2025, according to analysis published during the annual Business Aviation Summit hosted by specialist researcher Jefferies. Noting there are no signs of "demand destruction" thus far, Jefferies said, "business jet demand remains robust with stickiness in conversion of flyers from airline first-class to private aviation." The two-to four-year lead times for new aircraft have also created a sellers' market on the preowned side, which is pushing up pricing and resulting in quicker turns.

Corporate aircraft news

The prototype Gulfstream G800 made its first flight from the manufacturer's facility at Savannah, Georgia, on 28 June. Gulfstream's new flagship flew for just over two hours and used a blend of sustainable aviation fuel (SAF). The aircraft is expected to receive certification and enter service during Q3 2023. Gulfstream President Mark Burns said: "The G800 pushes the boundaries of performance even further with Gulfstream-designed aerodynamics and cabin technology, and we look forward to our customers benefiting from the longer range at higher speeds in our exceptional cabin environment." The G800 will seat up to 19 passengers and is expected to eventually replace the G650ER with which it shares its fuselage and cabin specifications.

Gulfstream has also won two major design awards for its G700. The aircraft received the International Yacht and Aviation Award 2022 for 'excellence in cabin design' in the private jet design category. The G700 also scooped an award for its seat design. Certification of the G700 is scheduled by the end of the year subject to scrutiny of the aircraft's software.

Having delivered the first example of its TBM 960 turboprop single to a European customer in April, French OEM Daher announced that the aircraft received FAA certification on 24 June. It is expected that delivery of the first two examples to US clients is imminent. The 960 is designed to replace the 940 and boasts a more fuel-efficient Pratt & Whitney Canada powerplant and digital e-throttle.

Airbus Helicopters confirmed that an H225 performed the first ever helicopter flight using 100% sustainable aviation fuel in early June. The flight is part of the manufacturer's efforts to certify the use of 100% SAF in Airbus helicopters and airliners by 2030. Airbus Helicopters Chief Technical Officer Stefan Thome said: "This flight with SAF powering the twin engines of the H225 is an important milestone for the helicopter industry. It marks a new stage in our journey to certify the use of 100% SAF in our helicopters, a fact that would mean a reduction of up to 90% in CO2 emissions."



AIRCRAFT FACT FILE \\\

Beechcraft Duchess



CATEGORY

Piston twin

MANUFACTURER

Beechcraft, USA

ENGINE

2 x Lycoming O-360-A1G6D piston

LENGTH

8.85 m

WINGSPAN

11.58 m

RANGE

1,440 km

MAX. SPEED

317 kmh

SEATING CAPACITY

3

NO. OF CREW

1

MAXIMUM TAKE-OFF WEIGHT (MTOW)

1,769 kg

DESCRIPTION

A total of 437 Beechcraft Duchess were produced between 1978 and 1983. The programme can be traced back to November 1974 with the unveiling of what was then known as 'Preliminary Design 289', which was itself based on the earlier Beechcraft Musketeer. The first production example made its first flight on 24 May 1977 with the aircraft now bearing the name 'Duchess' after a competition among the manufacturer's employees.

The Duchess is a cantilever low-wing monoplane with an all-metal structure. The aircraft features a tricycle undercarriage and characteristic 'T-tail'. Operational cost-effectiveness was the prime mover behind the Duchess concept. The aircraft was designed primarily as an economical twin-engine trainer to compete with the Cessna 310, the Gulfstream Cougar and Piper Seminole among others. A notable feature of the Duchess is its use of 'counter rotating' Lycoming engines that eliminate the 'critical engine' in the event of an emergency.