



SUKHOI'S SUPERJET SEARCHES FOR MORE WESTERN SALES

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Most of the passengers boarding Mexican airline Interjet's aircraft in Houston, San Antonio and Miami for flights south of the Rio Grande probably don't know much about the aircraft on which they will be flying.

For those sufficiently knowledgeable to realise it's not a Boeing, Airbus or Embraer, the name 'Sukhoi' may engender a brief frisson. Sukhoi? Isn't that a Russian company? A Russian airliner? Here, in the US?

According to Interjet and **Sukhoi**, any such reactions are rapidly fading as passengers get to know the **Superjet** 100 (SSJ100). And that's the point. It feels just like a western airliner.

That is not meant to sound condescending or patronising; Russia, and the Soviet Union before it, have always held a high reputation for aerodynamics. However, until recently, its airliners were built to a different design philosophy than their western counterparts. It was one where the tyranny of the bottom line did not hold sway.

That led older-generation Soviet airliners to look and feel very different from their capitalist rivals; inferior economics largely limited their use to use by the Soviet Union or allied nations.

The SSJ100 set out to change all that. Designed to western standards, with a bevy of western suppliers on board – Thales, Liebherr, Snecma and Honeywell, to name just some – it was to compete with western aircraft on equal terms.

Mexican budget carrier Interjet, for one, likes the aircraft. So much so that in March it topped up its original 2011 order for 20 by firming a further 10 options. The SSJ100 has, says the company, a 99% dispatch reliability, with a target of 99.5% to be achieved by year-end. The airline has been careful to make the SSJ100's cabin seem as interchangeable as possible with that of its other fleet type, the Airbus A320.

Both aircraft have a remarkable seat pitch, for a regional or short-haul aircraft, of 34 inches, while the Pininfarina-designed SSJ100's interior gets high marks from customers. In a recent passenger comfort survey, Interjet passengers actually said they preferred the Sukhoi over the Airbus.

All of this is music to the ears of SuperJet International, the Venice, Italy-based marketing and after-sales arm of Sukhoi. "We're offering narrow-body space for a regional airliner," said Eduardo Munhos de Campos, senior vice-president, commercial, for the Superjet program.

The SSJ100's forays into US airports have triggered briefings on, and tours of, the aircraft for several US carriers, he said. The biggest hurdle to overcome in the US is not technical issues but scope clauses: "We know of several negotiations ongoing where airlines are trying to increase the number of seats [allowed to be operated] to reduce this limitation."

Sukhoi's initial chance of a European order came last year from Belgium's VLM, which placed firm orders for two, took options on a further pair and purchase rights on 10 more. These were initially due for delivery this year but initial deliveries have been postponed to Q3 2016, partly to allow Sukhoi to have the long-range version of the SSJ100 – the variant VLM wants – to gain European certification. This should be achieved by year-end.

VLM was unable to provide a spokesman for this article, but chief executive Arthur White is on record as saying that, when comparing the SSJ100 with its competitors, the Russian aircraft "won hands-down" when comparing factors such as operating costs, passenger comfort and flexibility.

Also, Dublin-based CityJet is in talks over the possible acquisition of five SSJ-100-95s, as reported this week by RIA news agency, quoting sources in the Russian Ministry of Trade and Industry. Last week, Minister assured that the Superjet's western European launch operator would be a "British carrier."

Munhos admitted that SuperJet International has been in talks with several other interested European airlines. It foresees airlines slotting the Russian aircraft in below their existing, narrow-body fleets and also for ACMI providers: "We see opportunities for smaller airlines delivering capacity and feeding longer routes for bigger airlines."

So, why no more orders from western companies? "I think that our issue is not directly related to the fact that it's a Russian aircraft. It's to do with our lack of past performance in the market; we don't have a track record," said Munhos.

This is the classic Catch-22 situation: How do you gain that track record if nobody will give you a chance by buying it?

“We have to prove ourselves as a dependable service provider, and particularly, a provider of [after-market] support,” accepted Munhos.

Spares and aftersales service have often been the Achilles heel of Russian/Soviet aircraft, both civil and military. Five years ago, this writer raised this point with Alexei Fedorov, the then head of United Aircraft Corporation, Sukhoi’s parent company, in Moscow.

It was, he admitted, an issue of which he was acutely aware and real efforts were being made to solve the problem.

The result of those efforts can be seen today in the form of the customer support center in Venice, a spare parts center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida and a worldwide spares set-up backed by Lufthansa Technik Logistik.

The breakthrough can’t come soon enough for Sukhoi.

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