



SMALLEST AIRCRAFT MADE BY BOEING, AIRBUS TO PLY TRANS-ATLANTIC ROUTES

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The smaller jets will open up direct routes that wouldn't otherwise be viable and encourage competitive fares as carriers seek out smaller, less expensive airports.

The smallest aircraft made by Boeing Co. and Airbus Group SE are about to find a new role operating trans-Atlantic routes previously the preserve of some of the world's biggest planes.

The re-engined 737 Max and A320neo jets offer a 15-per-cent fuel saving meant to cut costs on the shortest inter-city services.

At the same time the revamp has added about 800 km. or so to their range — just enough to enable the narrow-bodies to span the 4,830 km. between the eastern U.S. and Western Europe.

While eight hours on a 130-ft. plane with three toilets and one gangway might not immediately appeal to travellers used to the spacious cabins of an Airbus A380, airlines say the smaller jets will

open up direct routes that wouldn't otherwise be viable.

That would do away with the need to switch between flights at a busy hub.

At the same time, people can look forward to competitive fares as carriers seek out smaller airports where access charges are lower.

Norwegian Air Shuttle ASA, JetBlue Airways Corp. and Portugal's TAP are among airlines buying the jets for trans-Atlantic routes. NAS is set to lead the way when it becomes one of the first carriers to get Boeing's Max 8 next year. Its initial flights may link Edinburgh, Birmingham in England and Cork and Shannon in Ireland to smaller airports in New England and the New York area.

"The Max is very competitive," Norwegian Air Chief Executive Officer Bjorn Kjos said in an interview in London.

"It has huge potential from the smaller cities along the Atlantic coast.

"But you can't go into New York as you do with wide-bodies.

"You must target airports with a totally different cost structure."

Boeing's 757, currently the world's longest single-aisle airliner with around 200 seats and a range in excess of 6,435-km., has been plying the Atlantic for years. Some companies, including United Continental Holdings Inc., are still deploying the model on routes such as Newark, New Jersey, to Birmingham, England.

Production ceased in 2004, however, leaving those 757s still flying in the twilight of their lives, their fuel consumption way in excess of that of modern jets.

The 737 is itself a fifty-year-old design, still in production but much-tweaked. It and the A320 were designed for much shorter flights. The original 737-100 seated just 85 people and was limited to trips of about 1,930 km. While ranges have increased, the 5,310-km. reach of the 737-800 and -900 is insufficient for fully laden operations on trans-Atlantic routes, where jets must carry enough reserve fuel to fly about 800 km. in an emergency.

There is also talk, on such industry websites as AirInsight of Bombardier's CSeries twin-engined airliner being used over the Atlantic in a dedicated business-class service, or carrying heavier loads if it turns out, as some have been saying, that the new Canadian jet has greater range than expected.

A handful of carriers operate the older narrow-body planes on services at reduced capacity, which cuts the weight of a plane and increases its range. SAS AB serves Boston from Copenhagen using an 86-seat 737-700 and British Airways connects London City airport and New York with an Airbus A318 carrying just 32 passengers.

The only current trans-Atlantic 737 or A320 services with a near-normal load are flown by Canada's WestJet Airlines Ltd. and link St. John's, Newfoundland, with Dublin, at a distance of about 3,220 km., and Halifax, Nova Scotia, with Glasgow in Scotland. The 737-700s used have 136 seats.

The U.K. and Irish routes planned for Norwegian's 189-seat Max 8s will span about 4,830 km. Subsequent flights could serve Stavanger, Trondheim and Bergen in Norway and Aalborg in

Denmark, although they'll likely involve a long-range version of Airbus's A321neo known as the LR and able to fly more than 6,435 km. using extra fuel tanks, spokesman Lasse Sandaker-Nielsen said. Norwegian ordered 30 of the planes with 220 seats in a single class in July.

JetBlue and TAP also plan to deploy the model, which is due to be available from 2019. The U.S. carrier has agreed to buy 30 A321neos with an option to take some as LR variants, saying it wants an aircraft with "trans-Atlantic range." TAP has orders for 10 A321neoLRs, saying it could use them to serve Brazil and possibly the U.S. Its Lisbon base is about 5,630 km. from both New York and Recife, the South American country's sixth-largest city. Ireland's Aer Lingus is also a likely operator of the A321neoLR across the Atlantic, Willie Walsh, CEO of parent company IAG SA, said in July, adding that the jet represents a "fantastic opportunity." It already flies 757s to locations including Hartford, Connecticut, typical of the cities smaller planes could serve.

With the LR emerging as a favoured successor to the 757, Boeing is studying designs for a stretch of its biggest Max 9, dubbed the Max 10, that would offer much of the range and payload of the A321 and could be ready by the decade's end, or a more elaborate revamp using the larger engines developed for the Airbus jet. It's also working on a new family of mid-range aircraft that would debut about five years later, CEO Dennis Muilenburg said Wednesday.

Passengers seem certain to be making longer trips on the smallest class of jetliners in coming years.

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