



First Boeing jet of many touches down in Qatar

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A Boeing 777-300ER gets a water-cannon salute Thursday in Doha, Qatar, after a flight from Everett. It is Qatar Airways' first Boeing jet in a fleet of Airbus planes, with 56 Boeing jets on order. (QATAR AIRLINES PHOTOS)

DOHA, Qatar -- A journey that began several years ago at the Dubai Air Show with talks between the top executives of The Boeing Co. and Qatar Airways was finally completed here Thursday after an airplane flight from Everett of 7,047 nautical miles that took 13 hours and 44 minutes.

When a new Boeing 777- 300ER arrived at the Doha airport to a water-cannon salute from two yellow fire trucks, **it represented much more than just the first Boeing jet that one of the world's fastest-growing airlines has taken into its fleet of 58 Airbus planes.**

It underscored a new bond between Boeing and the airline that could see Qatar Airways take nearly 100 Boeing jets in the coming years.

"This is the start of a long-term commitment and a prosperous business relationship with Boeing," said **Akbar Al Baker**, chief executive of Qatar Airways.

"Qatar Airways has cemented a relationship not just with Boeing but with the United States."

Starting in mid-January, the 335-seat 777-300ER will be used on Qatar's existing non-stop Airbus A340-600 service between Doha and Washington, D.C.

Many more Boeing jets are on their way to Qatar, a country on a small peninsula that extends into the Persian Gulf, with Saudi Arabia to the west and the United Arab Emirates to the south. It is smaller than Connecticut with a population of about 1 million, almost all of whom live in Doha, where more than 50 skyscrapers are under construction along with a huge new airport designed to accommodate the double-decker Airbus A380.

Qatar has the highest per capita income in the world. That wealth is the result of gas and oil reserves and has fueled a jetliner spending spree.

Qatar Airways has 26 more 777s on order, along with 30 787s, plus options to buy 30 more Dreamliners.

In an interview, Al Baker said the airline will exercise options to buy five more 777s, which will bring the total to 32.

Not so long ago, Qatar passed on the two-engine 777 in favor of the four-engine A340-600. The airline has four of the Airbus planes in its fleet. But Al Baker said he has let expire options to order more. The A340 has fallen out of favor with airlines because it is not as fuel-efficient as the 777.

The 777 will form the "core" of Qatar Airways' long-haul fleet, Al Baker said.

Qatar Airways is also the launch customer for the Airbus A350 XWB (extra wide body), with 80 firm orders. But those planes won't start arriving until late 2013.

Although it has ordered five A380s, the airline asked Airbus not to deliver them until 2012, after the new airport has opened.

Al Baker said the airline also is looking at ordering smaller jets and has eight single-aisle Airbus planes on order.

Al Baker acknowledged that Qatar Airways is losing money but said the airline should be operating profitably by 2010 or 2011.

It will then have a public offering, he said.

Meanwhile, Boeing's 777s are being delivered through the middle of 2010, which is also around the time that the first 787s will begin arriving.

"This is a very ambitious delivery plan," Al Baker said. "But it is very much in line with our huge expansion strategy, which will see Qatar Airways making its mark across the world."

Even though Qatar Airways has nearly 200 more planes on order from Boeing and Airbus, Al Baker disclosed that its fleet will stabilize at around 120 planes. Planes will be taken out of service after about five years, he said, and placed in a state-run aircraft leasing company, giving Qatar one of the world's youngest fleets.

Stephen Vella managing adviser for Qatar Airways, said later that the airline's jets will probably remain in service about seven years from delivery rather than five.

The Boeing orders include 13 more 777-300ERs like the one delivered Thursday, and six of the smaller 777-200LRs. The 777-200LRs will be used to open new routes to the U.S., including Houston next year, as well as to South America and Australia.

Qatar Airways serves 79 destinations and started its first non-stop U.S. service this summer to New York and Washington, D.C.

It will be the first airline in the Middle East to operate both the 787 and 777.

The 787, Al Baker said, will become the airline's backbone on regional routes as well as high-frequency, long-haul routes.

Although Qatar Airways has only ordered the 787-8 and 787-9, Al Baker said he's interested in the bigger 787-10, depending on its range.

Boeing continues to talk with possible customers about the size and range of the 787-10. It probably would not be available until around 2015.

Marty Bentrrott, recently named vice president of Boeing jetliner sales for the Middle East and Africa, said it likely will be six months to a year before Boeing decides how big the 787-10 will be and how far it will fly.

Boeing first wants to see the performance of the 787-8 during flight testing, the start of which has been delayed six months, to late March.

Bentrrott, who was on the delivery flight, is replacing Lee Monson who is retiring. Boeing invited the Seattle P-I on the flight.

Monson has been in the Middle East since the Dubai Air Show earlier this month.

During a delivery dinner celebration at the Four Seasons Hotel, Monson recalled how he and Harry Stonecipher, Boeing's former chief executive, had first talked with Al Baker about the 787 several years ago during the Dubai Air Show.

"We had some very interesting talks," Monson told guests. "All of us can thank Al Baker for driving us to make quicker decisions about the 787 than we were ever prepared to do."

He added: "This is the first night of a very, very long and, we hope, very productive relationship."