

06/03/1997

Unveiling of MAS' 1st B777-200

Hardev Kaur in Seattle

SEATTLE, Wed: Malaysia Airlines' first 777-200 unveiled yesterday "sets new standards for interiors and the industry with its many unique features and low density as well as sets a new benchmark for inflight services".

The long range aircraft with a price tag of RM130 million is the first of its type with a business centre fully equipped with state-of-the-art equipment designed to give the busy executive "an office in the sky".

Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli, Malaysia Airlines chairman, said the airline worked together with the manufacturer, Boeing, to provide the state-of-the-art interiors which are more pleasant and comfortable. The ideas for the facilities nevertheless "are ours" and not that of Boeing.

Microsoft helped to equip the business centre with notebook computers, printers and other essentials for the executive while British Telecoms and Matsushita supplied various hardware for the aircraft.

Tajudin said the "state-of-the-art facilities" in the new aircraft are also in keeping with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's push for the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) and electronic communications.

The facilities will be further improved and more added as the airline takes delivery of other 777s. With the sixth 777 in 1998, for example, passengers in the first and business class will enjoy inflight entertainment on a wider touch screen. For a start, with the first 777, every seat is equipped with its own individual TV screen.

Eventually businessmen will be able to send their e-mail from some 42,000 ft up in the air to anywhere in the world.

Malaysia Airlines is the first South-East Asian operator to receive the long-range 777-200 IGW (Increased Gross Weight) variant. It also offers passengers facilities to call anywhere in the world or other passengers in the aircraft.

Powered by a Rolls Royce Trent 800 engine, the aircraft has a seating capacity of 278. The aircraft type can take up to 328 passengers in three classes, thus making for one of the lowest densities in the industry and increasing customer comfort.

During the unveiling of the aircraft, in about 3 degrees celcius, at the Everett Plant tonight, Boeing vice-president for International Sales, Mr Seddik Belyamani disclosed that Malaysia Airlines is the largest operator of Boeing aircraft outside the US.

The manufacturer and the national carrier have had 30 years of "partnership". Belyamani said this is in keeping with the theme of the unveiling - "A partnership for the Future".

Boeing, which is working on other variants of the 777 set for entry into service beyond the year 2000, hopes to continue this partnership into the future.

In fact, the two parties signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which will see the two parties working closer together for the launch of the new 777 variant and Malaysia Airlines will be the launch customer for the 777-200X.

Tajudin signed on behalf of the national carrier while Belyamani signed for the aircraft manufacturer.

Tajudin said the new aircraft - the 777-200X - will fulfill the carrier's plans for longer range routes. The range of the 777-2000X is about 8,500 nautical miles which will enable the aircraft to fly to Los Angeles with a full pay load from Kuala Lumpur.

He said the airlines route structure is changing and the new variant will fulfill the national carrier's plans into the early part of the 21st century. Boeing requires its launch customer to buy a minimum of six aircraft "... but more is always good", the Boeing executive said.

Belyamani disclosed that the aircraft manufacturer is also in discussions with Malaysia Airlines for the manufacture of some parts for use in Boeing aircraft.

Tajudin said the airline, which has decided to concentrate on meeting its customers expectations and the manufacture of parts, is "not part of our agenda" nevertheless added that "we will act as a catalyst and get other parties" for the manufacture of the parts.

With an aircraft manufacturing industry beginning to see light in Malaysia, the MoU may provide the additional impetus. Tajudin said there will be spillover benefits to be derived by Malaysia Airlines from this venture.

The Boeing team which is already in Kuala Lumpur is exploring various possibilities and seeking out possible partners. Belyamani said it is too early to name the partners but hastened to add that "we are sure we will" find them.

The parts to be manufactured in Malaysia will be for use by all Boeing aircraft around the world. This is another vote of confidence for Malaysian capabilities.

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