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General aviation is flying high

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GENERAL aviation (GA) has been soaring in the country. Since 1997, Eagle Aircraft Sdn Bhd has been spearheading the development of the local GA industry, generating interest in light aircraft flying and spreading its business beyond the shores of Malaysia.

GA in Malaysia was worth RM238.1 million in 2002, compared with RM210 million in 2001 and a mere RM163.9 million in 2000. This was attributed mainly to the efforts taken by the Malaysian Industry-Government Group For High Technology (MIGHT) to promote GA to the general public. In fact, MIGHT drafted a blueprint aimed at realising the government's ambition of becoming the region's aerospace and aviation hub by 2015. It was launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1997. The government has been a strong supporter of the industry. It started the ball rolling by setting up the Composites Technology Research Malaysia Bhd (CTRM), the parent company of Eagle Aircraft.

Today, the future looks positive for the local aerospace industry, especially GA, the most important base for a country aspiring to go far in aviation. To date there are 148 GA aircraft registered with the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) - 99 fixed wing and 49 rotor aircraft. Twenty-two companies, individuals, government agencies, training institutes and flying clubs own these planes.

Eagle Aircraft, the producer of Malaysia's only certified lightweight aircraft, Eagle, started off by making some components of the aircraft in Australia. In 2002, it moved the Australian operations to Batu Berendam, Melaka, turning it into a 100% made-in-Malaysia aircraft.

'Moving the whole operations to Malaysia was our goal last year and we have achieved it. Now, we have total capability to produce the Eagle in Malaysia, from building the components to testing the aircraft,' says Anuar Ghazali, the general manager of Eagle Aircraft. But the engine is imported from the United States.

With the whole operations now under one roof on Malaysian soil, the next step is to build the supporting industry in the surrounding area, Anuar says.

'In the US, small airports like Batu Berendam would have all the supporting industries nearby. We now have a manufacturing plant there, a flying academy and a flying club next to each other. We are planning to bring in companies from Singapore and Australia to set up their base to complete the picture,' Anuar says.

'To start up from scratch and build a new company would take at least 10 years. By attracting established companies to come here, we could speed up the process. Malaysia is 30 to 40 years behind in aviation compared to the US, the world leader in GA. We need to catch up,' he says. By year-end, the company expects to garner RM12 million in aircraft sales, and the figure is expected to double in 2004 as interest in aviation increases on the local front.

The Malaysian Flying Academy (MFA) has agreed to purchase 10 units of Eagle, which costs RM500,000 each. Four of the aircraft are scheduled for delivery to the MFA by December. Eagle Aircraft has also appointed AAC Air Sdn Bhd as its distributor in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. For the US market, the company has appointed a new dealer, Explorer Aircraft Inc in Texas, to be the Eagle's main hub for the region, which accounts for 50% of Eagle sales. Anuar says Eagle Aircraft will produce another type of

four-seater aircraft soon to expand its product base and compete better with other manufacturers.

Another indication that the industry is moving forward is the emergence of small-scale light aircraft assemblers in the country. One of them, Subang-based Eurodynamic Sdn Bhd, has started assembling experimental aircraft on a small scale with kits bought from the US. Nevertheless, the company is starting to make its presence felt. Eurodynamic has produced four of its own two-seater Zodiac aircraft so far. All the four aircraft are now used by Eurodynamic's flying club, which has more than 100 members and is growing in membership strength. The Zodiac aircraft was designed in the 80s by a Canadian company and is widely used for training in the US and Canada.

Although it does not design the aircraft on its own, it can still pride itself on the local knowledge and expertise that go into building the 2.2-litre single-engine aircraft. Eurodynamic's engineers and technicians are locals who formerly worked in the Royal Malaysian Air Force, Malaysia Airlines and other airlines.

'Using our local expertise, we can cut down the price of the plane to only RM150,000 per unit, which is similar to the price of an imported car,' says Mohd Raffick Mohd Nor, the managing director of Eurodynamic and Chairman of MIGHT Interest Group in General Aviation.

What is interesting is that club members could also participate in building the aircraft, a rare opportunity anywhere in the world. Although the company has yet to sell aircraft to individuals, its efforts have seen about 30 people getting their Private Pilot Licence (restricted) from the club alone.

'By the end of the year Eurodynamic will add another certified aircraft to our club because the demand for recreational and pilot training has increased,' says Mohd Raffick, who started the company in 1997 with a capital of less than RM100,000. With the new four-seater aircraft and aggressive marketing, Mohd Raffick is confident the club would spark more interest among the public.

Apart from Eurodynamic, Eagle Aircraft is also doing its part to promote aviation. 'Eagle is currently working with the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Science and Technology to promote interest in aviation among young people. We will select 15 Form Four students from all over the country for a programme we have planned,' says Anuar. The students will have to sit a test to determine whether they are genuinely interested in the four-and-a-half-day programme, scheduled to start in September.

'We hope that these students would end up in the aerospace and aviation industry after completing their studies. In 20 years' time, I believe Malaysians will be capable of turning Malaysia into a respected nation in aviation,' he says.

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