

Getting off the Ground

Eclipse has begun testing the production version of its very light jet.



WHEN THE FIRST FAA-conforming Eclipse 500 very light jet took to the skies this past New Year's Eve, the event marked the beginning of a seven-plane flight test program that should culminate with certification in March 2006 and customer deliveries soon after for those who already have secured a spot on the waiting list. Those who have not will have to wait until at least mid-2008.

The aircraft's builder, Eclipse Aviation of Albuquerque, N.M., expects to sell the plane for \$1.175 million, an increase from the \$950,000 that it previously was planning to charge but still less expensive than the projected prices of most other very light jets—and substantially less than any business jets. "My background in the software business is to make the product better and sell it for less," explains Eclipse founder Vern Raburn, who was among the first employees at Microsoft.

Unlike the prototype tested in 2003, the seven flight test planes represent production aircraft. They were built on the company's new production line, and they are flying with Pratt & Whitney PW610F engines, pressurization, climate control, and ice protection. The aircraft reached 16,800 feet and 230 mph during that first day of testing. The seven planes are expected to continue their test flights on a daily basis until certification.

Eclipse replaced the original Williams EJ22 engines with the Pratt & Whitney PW610Fs at the end of 2002 because of concerns that the aircraft would be underpowered. The change in suppliers may have postponed

delivery of the Eclipse 500 by as much as two years. However, with the new engines, the aircraft's top speed has increased to 432 mph, and it has a range of 1,473 miles (carrying a pilot and three passengers). The Eclipse 500 is designed to reach a maximum altitude of 41,000 feet.

Eclipse claims that the plane's interior, as designed by the industrial design firm IDEO and BMW Group DesignworksUSA, resembles that of a luxury sedan. The luxury version adds all-leather seats, armrests, improved lighting, and wool carpets among its enhancements. The cockpit also includes leather trim and, of greater significance to pilots/owners, three high-tech avionics screens. The pilot and copilot each have a primary flight display—showing the basic flight instruments and a horizontal situation indicator—that is similar to those found in late-model Piper and Cirrus aircraft. Between these two screens is a wide-screen moving map.

Eclipse Aviation has enlisted United Airlines to provide pilot training for owners of the new aircraft. The purchase price includes a weeklong type rating transition course for one pilot. Eclipse has arranged with AIG to provide insurance coverage for any owner/pilot who passes the training course. The price of insurance will vary from \$27,000 to \$44,000 per year, depending on the amount of coverage and the owner/pilot's level of experience.

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If all goes as planned, the Eclipse 500 should receive FAA certification within the year.