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Light jets spawn new business flights

By ADRIAN SAINZ

BOCA RATON, FLA.

Business consultant Rich Paul-Hus travels throughout Florida, sometimes needing to reach mid-sized cities such as Tallahassee to see an important client.

But as in many states, it's often a hassle getting to Florida's small or mid-sized cities. It usually requires standing in long security lines at busy airports in Fort Lauderdale or Miami, switching to a commuter plane in Orlando or even Atlanta, and paying for an overnight hotel stay because there are no flights home until the next day.

Other alternatives are spending several unproductive hours driving or using a very expensive charter plane.

So count Paul-Hus as one of many people eagerly anticipating the launch of DayJet, a startup airline that will use a new line of "very light jets" to whisk one to three business passengers around the state. Scheduled to launch late August or early September, DayJet hopes its business model could popularize per-seat, "on demand" executive air travel and expand elsewhere, although some observers fear it could end up as a great idea that didn't work.

"I see Dayjet as an opportunity for a business our size to have access to jet travel on demand to meet a client when we need to meet a client," said Paul-Hus, vice president of business development for Fort-Lauderdale HyPower Inc. "I would not be at the mercy of commercial scheduling, where I may have to fly to an airport 50 miles or 100 miles away from my final destination."

DayJet will offer single seats for business travelers who have appointments or meetings in or near Boca Raton, Gainesville, Lakeland, Pensacola and Tallahassee -- cities where air service is lacking and places that traditionally have been driving destinations.

The centerpiece of its business model is the new Eclipse 500 jet, which goes up to 425 mph and can get to Lakeland from Boca Raton in about 35 minutes, compared to three hours by car. Airline trade magazines and other observers are tracking DayJet's progress, partially as a referendum on the performance and viability of the Eclipse 500. The jet's speed allows DayJet to lure clients with the proposition that they can travel to their meeting and be home the same day.

"I can get my people directly to where their business circle is, versus having to go to some major airport, fight the (security) lines, get in a rental car and then drive two or three hours," DayJet pilot Rick Hemphill said. "Time is money to these people."

DayJet CEO Ed Iacobucci wants to have about 50 Eclipse 500 jets in operation by the end of the year, and people such as Mayor John Fretti of Valdosta, Ga., are eager to see if DayJet does well enough to move into

other small airports in Florida and the Southeast. At least one other company, Concord Mass.-based air taxi Linear Air, has a deal in place to order 30 Eclipse 500 jets over the next two years to add to its air fleet. The jets cost about \$1.6 to \$1.7 million each.

"People feel that these airplanes have the ability to basically be little airlines that fly people around so they can avoid the congestion of the larger airports," travel consultant Bob Harrell said.

DayJet will use complex mathematic models and formulas to work out how to position jets to get clients to their destinations safely and on time, while trying to make money in the process.

With financing of \$68 million, Iacobucci employed what he calls "ant farmers" to establish computer models based on demographic data to determine potential demand and logistics in various Florida markets outside of the bigger cities.

"Aviation is how we deliver our service, but there's a whole lot of layers of capabilities that are beneath the surface that you don't see," Iacobucci said.

HyPower will have an account with DayJet for four employees, Paul-Hus said.

"It's about replacing that four- or five-hour drive with that quick flight," Paul-Hus said.

Companies who sign up with DayJet enter the company's Web site, which has no set itinerary or pricing. Instead, users enter their cities of origin and destination and the time they want to depart and arrive. Users also enter how much time they need to complete their trip, and the company's computers then decide the flight's price.

For example, a one-way direct flight from Boca Raton to Gainesville, with a two-hour window for DayJet to complete the trip, would cost about \$854. Such a scenario would apply to someone who needs to leave Boca by 8 a.m. and get to Gainesville by 10 a.m.

With a more flexible four-hour travel window, the one-way price would drop to about \$458. With six hours, it's about \$331. On its Web site, DayJet promises a maximum 30-minute wait.

With two weeks advance booking, Delta Air Lines' website showed one-way weekday fares from Miami to Gainesville at \$711, with a stop and a change of planes in Atlanta. With multiple stops, Delta's Miami-to-Gainesville flight costs as low as \$539.50, but it's at least an 8-hour trip.

US Airways' one-way weekday fare to Gainesville was \$523 with two-week's notice, including a stop and change of planes in Charlotte, N.C.

The commercial flights would take no less than four hours. With a half-hour wait and a roughly 1 1/2-hour flight, DayJet could get to Gainesville in about half that time.

Clients get a price when they finish entering the information, but won't get a departure and arrival time until the night before the trip, by e-mail. That's because DayJet's computers will wait until the last moment to build a flight schedule that best uses its planes.

One of the beneficiaries of DayJet's service could be the individual cities who have had thin air service, such as Gainesville. DayJet is bringing 16 jobs to Gainesville's airport, said Brent Christensen, the Chamber of Commerce president in the college town of about 100,000 people.

"We see this as helping us address a need and a weakness," Christensen said. "The opportunity for us to really be looked at as a strong economic development community is to be able to travel to and from places in the Southeast."

However, some wonder if the flights will be too expensive, and if DayJet will be able to manage costs to turn a profit and operate long-term. Also, with new aircraft come questions on maintenance and reliability.

"Can you make any money in this business, and how much are you going to have to charge to be able to make money, and are there enough people willing to make this kind of financial commitment?" Harrell said.

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