

Lufthansa Flying Airbus A380 to U.S.

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FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) - It may trail the historic impact of Charles Lindbergh's 1927 solo flight across the Atlantic, but the Spirit of St. Louis also did not have a wingspan wider than a football field or space for more than 500 passengers.

For plane builder Airbus and German airline Lufthansa AG, the A380's first flight to North America on Monday is a chance to show off the superjumbo to potential U.S. buyers and to the airports they hope will be flight bases for the double-decker jet.

"We're talking about an airplane that is representing aviation in the 21st century in terms of efficiency," said Jens Bischoff, Lufthansa's vice president for the Americas.

For Airbus, which has been beset by management and financial crises—including a two-year delay to the A380 that wiped more than \$6.61 billion off profit forecasts—the flight is a chance to prove that the plane will be ready when the first deliveries are made in October to Singapore Airlines.

Lufthansa Chief Pilot Juergen Raps, who has flown the A380 before, said that despite the superjumbo's size, it is nimble and responsive.

"If I were to compare it to driving, you would think this would be like driving a truck or a bus," he said inside the plane's cockpit. "It's like driving a Ferrari."

The air show Monday begins at Frankfurt International Airport, when the 239-foot-long plane takes off as Lufthansa Flight 8940 at 9 a.m. (4 a.m. EDT) for the eight-hour flight to New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport. Onboard will be 550 people, including four pilots, four Airbus crew members, 23 Lufthansa cabin crew and 519 passengers, mostly Airbus and Lufthansa employees along with some reporters.

The flight will operate just as if it were a commercial one, with full dining and entertainment services.

As a test on Sunday, organizers boarded more than 500 people onto the aircraft using two jetways with an impressive time of less than 20 minutes. A second test was held to see if the Lufthansa workers could board it faster.

Airbus pilot Wolfgang Absmeier said the boarding process Monday will take longer.

"People are going to be curious and looking around as they get on," he said, standing at the base of a staircase leading to the plane's second level.

After the inaugural run, Lufthansa and Airbus will operate a demonstration flight to Chicago's O'Hare International Airport on Tuesday before returning to New York and then to Frankfurt. The plane then heads to Hong Kong and back before continuing its journey to Washington Dulles International Airport on March 25, with a final stop at Lufthansa's Munich hub March 28 to complete the series of optimization flights.

Using the performance results from this circuit—flying the plane as if it were in service—Lufthansa's goal is to match the A380's turnaround time from landing to takeoff with that of much smaller long-haul jets already in operation.

The A380, which burns about one gallon of gas per passenger every 80 miles and can fly some 8,000 nautical miles, can seat as many as 550 passengers. Airbus has 166 orders from 15 airlines for the new plane, which has already made tests flights in Europe and to Asia.

"We are proud that ... we are now able to present the A380 to the American people," said Mario Heinen, the head of Airbus' A380 program. "Both JFK and LAX, as well as Chicago O'Hare International and Washington Dulles International Airport, are key future destinations for the A380."

The Frankfurt-New York flight is one of two A380 flights to the United States on Monday. The other is an A380 operated by Australian airline Qantas that is flying to Los Angeles International Airport but devoid of passengers and crew, save for those in the cockpit.

Toulouse, France-based Airbus said that plane will perform tests at the California airport, including airfield maneuvers, docking at the terminal gate and ground and gate handling exercises. The Los Angeles airport, the fifth-busiest worldwide, is expected to be the first U.S. destination for the A380 when it enters commercial service.

Lufthansa, which has orders for 15 A380s and an option for five more, expects to use the planes on its international routes, mainly to Asia and North America. It expects the first one to be delivered in mid- pushed back from 2008 by the manufacturing delays.

The problems at Airbus led Louis Gallois, co-chief executive of parent company European Aeronautic Defense and Space Co., to call 2006 "the worst year for Airbus in its life." Airbus is seeking to recoup its losses by cutting 10,000 jobs and spinning off or closing six of its European manufacturing plants.

On the Net:

Airbus: <http://www.airbus.com>

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