

The right aircraft for the Market – the Air Contractors Boeing 737-300

In our discussions with Jean – François Dominiak, CEO of Europe Airpost (EAP), on the 17th November as reported in our January 2012 edition (Issue 1, Volume 8), he noted that the Boeing 737-36Q, EI-STA, operated by Air Contractors on their Air Operators Certificate (AOC) for their charter flight activity out of Ireland was in common with the Europe Airpost fleet the “the right answer to the market’s demand”. Both Air Contractors and Europe Airpost are members of the ASL Group based in Swords, Co. Dublin. He also believes that the ASL braded airlines offer levels of comfort and service and a flexibility that meets the requirements of the Irish leisure market. Flying in Ireland was given the opportunity to see the Air Contractor operation at first hand and experience its service for ourselves.

Arrangements were soon in place as I was off to Dublin airport at 03:00 for a 05:00 scheduled departure of ABD407J, a weekly ski charter to Salzburg in Austria. Salzburg is one of a number of popular ski destinations served from Dublin and this morning’s flight was operated on behalf of Dublin based Crystal Holidays, a leading ski tour operator.

The flight departed from Terminal 1 and I collected my ticket from the tour operators desk without undue formality and proceeded to Area 10 for check-in. Two desks were open and check was quickly and efficiently completed by Sky Handling staff who are the handling agents for Air Contractor’s Dublin flights. By 03:10, I was checked in but had to wait for the security and frisking area to open. I was well impressed with this revamped area which is bright, open

and spacious and has an automated passenger screening system known as Autopass, which is aimed at reducing security queuing times for departing passengers. It was introduced last year and has been positively received by passengers. I then made my way to gate 333 in the circular Pier B. At that stage my aircraft was not on stand but it was shortly towed into position.

Boarding was completed at the appointed time and without undue delay and I took my window seat in row 2 (2A). Boeing 737-36Q, EI-STA is just over 14 years old having first flown on 2nd October 1997 and was delivered to Deutsche BA as D-ADBDM 24th October 1997. Deutsche BA was established in March 1992 by British Airways (BA) and started operations in June 1992 who had a 49% stake in Delta Air, a regional airline based at Friedrichshafen in Germany. They



Captain Dimi Ryan



First Officer Joe Lynch



The right aircraft for the Market – the Air Contractors Boeing 737-300

Drawing of the Europe Airpost Boeing 737-315 EI-STA used on the flight from Dublin to Salzburg. Courtesy of Andy McKay/Greypencils.



renamed it Deutsche BA and it flew its aircraft in a variation of the then British Airways colour scheme. The airline amassed significant losses and in June 2003, BA announced plans to sell Deutsche BA to Intro Verwaltungsgesellschaft for a token sum of €1. It was then rebranded as dba and given its own colour scheme and D-ADBМ continued to fly for dba until transferred to Thomson Airways as G-THOG on 31st March 2005. The aircraft was re-painted into Europe Airpost livery at Air Livery's facility at Manchester in March 2010 before been flown to Luton on 13th

March. The aircraft was delivered Luton-Dublin on the 24th of March and two days later it operated a Dublin-Lourdes round trip as a proving flight for its Air Contractors passenger AOC. It subsequently received 'Operated by Air Contractors' titles on the nose.

Looking around you could see evidence of her German heritage with signage in German and English. The aircraft is fitted with 148 comfortable black leather seats (one more than its Europe Airpost cousins) which have a reasonable seat pitch. Outside it was still dark and cold requiring the aircraft

to be de-iced. Unfortunately departure was delayed as a truck behind the aircraft had broken down and had to be towed away before we could depart. As soon as this was done, the two CFMI CFM56-3B2 engines were powered up and at 05.33 the aircraft pushed back. We taxied towards the hold of Runway 28 and at 05:42 we were airborne and on our way.

Prior to departure the three cabin crew members, Lynda, Giosia and Paval carried out the safety demonstration and once airborne Lynda announced details of the cabin



EI-STA on the ramp at Salzburg

service. A little over ten minutes after takeoff, the cabin crew began the in-flight service with the sale of newspapers followed by the food service. In common with many short haul European carriers, Air Contractors offers a la carte food service for purchase. It features sandwiches or pizza (€4.50) cold or hot drinks (€1.50/€2), sweets and chocolate (€1.50-€3) and Pringles or nuts (€1.50/€2). Alcoholic drinks such as wine, beer spirits and cider (all €4.50) as well as Champagne (€12.50) are also available. Bundled items such as a drink with a sandwich are available at a reduced price. An airline model, key rings and newspaper are also available.

Notable was the fact that the cabin service was unobtrusive, but was carried out quietly, quickly and efficiently in contrast to the 'hard sell' of some other airlines. Being an intra EU flight there was no duty free service but as with the food service the cabin crew made themselves available if passenger wanted additional items or gifts. Given that it was still dark, passengers seemed to appreciate this and many of the 109 passengers on board took the opportunity to catch up on their sleep after a quick refreshment. Personally, I found the food selection tasty and on a par with other 'full service' European carriers.

The 28 runway departure was followed by a right hand turn and out over the Irish Sea to Hollyhead routing then towards Shrewsbury, Birmingham and London passing over the coast at Folkestone at around 06.30. We passed the French coast south of Calais heading South-east towards Rennes and then Mulhouse before our southerly routing took us past Lake Constance before turning north east towards Salzburg.

During the flight I had the opportunity to talk to the cabin crew. Lynda, has had a varied airline career having initially worked for a Middle - Eastern carrier before returning to Ireland to work for Irish charter operator Transaer. Following their



demise her subsequent career eventually took her to Air Contractors and she has been with them since their inception. Giosia, short for Malgorzata (or Margaret in English), hails from Poland and has been working in Ireland for some five years while Pavel who is Italian has been in Ireland for two years. If they are the standard of Air Contractors cabin crew, its owners should be proud as they were professional yet friendly without being overly familiar. They were well turned out in their black uniforms with the corporate purple trim and quickly changed from jackets to jumper for Pavel and blouses for Lynda and Giosia as the flight service required.

I also had the opportunity to talk to Ray Scully, Managing Director of Crystal Holidays and a council member of the Irish Tour Operators Federation. Crystal is part of the TUI group and indeed on the adjoining stand in Dublin was a Thomson 737 which his company was operating on a weekly charter to Innsbruck. In addition to these two destinations his

company also operate ski charters to Plovdiv in Bulgaria as well as Toulouse in France both operated by Air Contractors. He expressed his satisfaction with Air Contractors adding that they "were great people to work with".

We were soon on approach to Salzburg's runway 34 and landed on the 2,750 metre runway at 08:54 local (07:54 Irish) some 2 hours and 12 minutes after departing Dublin. We parked at a remote stand opposite the terminal and disembarkation was swiftly completed with the passengers being bussed to the terminal. They were quickly replaced by an army of cleaners while the paperwork (including my own) was sorted out by the local handling agent. Even though this was the aircraft's first sector, I was impressed by the standard of cleaning the aircraft received with a complete vacuuming and each seat and tray table thoroughly attended to.

For my part, I took the opportunity of the stopover to talk to the flight crew



Captain Demi (Diarmuid) Ryan and first officer Joe Lynch. Both are ex Ryanair pilots and have been with the airline for two years. Demi has around 16,000 hours while Joe would have around 5,000 and both enjoy the work and the airline. To-day is a standard for them operating the two sectors to and from Salzburg and like the cabin crew they are rostered to do the following days Toulouse ski charter. Around 10 tons of fuel was loaded for the flight and the estimated fuel burn was 6 tons. It was just time for some photos before the crew prepared themselves for the inbound passengers as a light snow began to fall.

Having been given my seat assignment by the handling agent, I



took my seat in 14D as the flight filled up. It was a full house for the return flight and at having closed up the aircraft we pushed back at 09.45 and taxied out to runway 34 and were airborne at 09:49.

On the return journey I took the opportunity to speak to some of the passengers about their experience and perceptions of the airline. Almost none of them had heard of Air Contractors or indeed Europe Airpost. All of them were impressed by the level of service, seat pitch and comfort on the flight. Particular comments were made about the unobtrusive service, assigned seating and cleanliness of the aircraft. If there was a downside, it was the early start but it did allow them to maximise their time in the resort.

Our return routing took us south of Munich, past Stuttgart then south of Mannheim past Brussels and Bruges

before crossing the coast at Oostende. We made landfall on the English coast near Southend and skirted to the north of London past Oxford, Gloucester across Wales towards Dun Laoghaire where we positioned for landing on runway 10 at Dublin. Touchdown was at 11:03 local (12:03 Austrian) giving us a flying time of two hours 14 minutes for the 930 mile journey, two minutes longer than the outbound. For both myself and the crew the day was over although the crew would be back the following morning for the 07:00 departure to Toulouse (ABR415J) which would see them back in Dublin at 12:00. For EI-STA there was the necessary preparation for her flight, the 13:00 departure to Plovdiv (ABR401J), another ski charter, that would not see the aircraft back in Dublin until 22:10. There was just time to say goodbye to Demi, Joe, Lynda, Giosia and Paval who had made me feel so welcome and who had patiently answered my many questions. Thanks to Ray Scully of Crystal Holidays and to Claude Foucault and Edmund Linton in Paris and of course Jean – François Dominiak who made the experience possible. And yes you do have the right answer to the market's demand!



Cabin Crew Paval, Giosia and Lynda



Photos for this article were supplied by Jim Lee and EI-AMD photos