

I'm Flying In That? Unloved Turboprop Gets Second Look

Silver Airways bets latest propeller planes can win over passengers who recall bumpy, noisy flights on earlier models.

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A small Florida airline is doubling down on a passenger plane that bigger carriers have long abandoned: the turboprop.

Silver Airways LLC plans to start flying a new, propeller-driven 46-seater in coming weeks. It would be the first new turboprop introduced into U.S. passenger service in years.

The privately held airline expects delivery of 20 new turboprops by the middle of next year, including a roomier 70-seater, to replace an aging fleet of earlier models, some 20 years old.

That is flying in the opposite direction to most other American carriers. Early versions of the turboprop earned a reputation for being bumpy and noisy. Jets came to supplant them on most routes by the late 1990s. Silver Air, and other turboprop boosters, say the planes have come a long way since those days and deserve a second look.

"It's a beautiful ride, and it's a quiet ride," said Chief Executive Steve Rossum, whose airline based in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., flies nearly 100 routes, mostly within Florida and to the Caribbean. The new planes are built by France-based Avions de Transport Regional, or ATR. "We are going to do a great job of rebuilding the turboprop perception in the U.S.," Mr. Rossum said.

A turboprop might look like an old-fashioned, piston-engine propeller plane, but it has more modern jet engines that drive the rotating blades to propel the aircraft. It was the principal option for short domestic commercial flights in the U.S. until 1993, when Comair, which later became a Delta Airlines Inc. feeder airline, started using 50-set jets. The turboprop airline fleet peaked in the U.S. shortly thereafter, at roughly 1,900 aircraft. The number used in day-to-day airline service now stands at fewer than 100 planes.

Last July, American Airlines Group Inc. retired its last turboprop, a Dash 8, made by Bombardier Inc. of Canada and flown by American's Piedmont Airlines subsidiary. It was the last of the big U.S. airlines to still fly a turboprop.

As jets took over U.S. skies, propeller planes started to appear outdated. Many passengers remember the sometimes-shaky flights, loud engines and cramped spaces of the turboprops of yesteryear.

A high profile crash of an ATR turboprop in the U.S. in 1994, killing all 68 people onboard, also marred the image of such planes.

Brian Jacobson, who last flew on a turboprop on a flight from Detroit to Milwaukee about a decade ago, associates propeller-driven planes with small-plane crashes he sees on the local news. "I would generally prefer to be on a jet," said Mr. Jacobson, a 30-year old attorney who lives in Chicago. "It seems safer."

Accident rates for turboprops – which in many parts of the world serve remote regions where operations can be more challenging – are higher than for jets.

In North America, on average 0.91 turboprop was lost per million flights each year between 2013 and 2017. For jets, the average annual loss rate was 0.21 aircraft per million flights during the same period.

ATR says the that plane enhancements, such as the introduction of new onboard electronics, combined with efforts to bolster training, are helping to close the safety gap between turboprops and jets.

A spokeswoman for Silver Airways said the airline's fleet of Saab turboprops had a strong safety record, and that the airline hasn't had any fatal accidents in its three-decade history. She said the accident statistics could be skewed by smaller operators flying in extreme weather conditions in places such as Alaska.

Today's turboprops don't resemble earlier models, thanks to years of technological advances. They now feature gear to damp vibration and reduce cabin noise, putting their comfort level on par with smaller jets. "There is the perception props are noisy, they feel uncomfortable, you feel a lot of vibration during flights," even though that no longer applies to modern designs, said Ray Jaworski, a Forecast International analyst.

In many cases, they also burn far less fuel, making them much cheaper to operate over short distances. During short hops, planes spend most of the journey either ascending or descending, with little time at cruise altitude, where a jet's higher speed saves the most time. On such flights, turboprops can complete the journey in roughly the same time as a jet while consuming a fraction of the fuel.

"A turboprop aircraft is not an old-technology aircraft. It is a modern, high-technology aircraft," said Stefano Bortoli, chief executive of ATR, a joint venture between Airbus SE and Italy's Leonardo SpA.

Outside the U.S., many airlines still love the turboprops. Turboprops, for instance, fly regularly between London City airport and Aberdeen, Scotland, a two-hour 20 minutes long journey that includes a stop in Newcastle.

While the U.S. fleet of turboprops is vanishing, the global fleet is still growing strongly. ATR expects it to number 4,060 turboprops in passenger service in 2037, up from 2,260 last year.

Together, ATR and Bombardier make almost all of the world's commercial turboprops. Bombardier, amid wider restructuring, in November agreed to sell that business to Longview Aviation Capital Corp., the parent of Canadian aircraft maker Viking Air Ltd.

The turboprop "isn't sexy if you look at it from a distance," Mr. Bortoli said, but he added: "If people would get to know it better, they would discover a gem."

Jonathan Rost of Plymouth, Wis., is a fan. He said there is a certain charm turboprops have lent to his getaways to the Bahamas. He last flew Silver in 2015, from Fort Lauderdale to Treasure Cay in the Bahamas. He described the roughly hourlong flight as comfortable, if a bit noisier than riding on a jet.

It's always been kind of an adventure to get to this little spot that we love," said Mr. Rost, 71.