THIRD STRETCHED AIRBUS A350 TEST PLANE TO JOIN FLIGHT TRIALS

News / Manufacturer

The third and final aircraft needed to complete flight trials of Airbus's enlarged A350-1000 jet is poised to join the test programme as the manufacturer pushes to hand over the first production plane to Qatar Airways before the end of the year.

The 1000, a stretched model seating 40 more people than the existing A350-900, is on course for certification in the second half after its first flight on November 24. The initial test plane was this month joined by a second fitted with heavy instrumentation, with the third set to move over in "coming weeks", said François Obé, who heads the A350 marketing team, at Airbus' base in Toulouse, France.

The last aircraft will feature a full cabin and take part in route-proving exercises and flights aimed at confirming the model's maximum permitted distance beyond the nearest diversionary airport. The so-called extended twin-engine operations – or Etops – range is a key limiting factor for two-turbine planes such as the A350 when performing trans-oceanic services.

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Wingsets for five or six A350-1000s, including the first few production aircraft, have already been shipped from Airbus' plant in Broughton, Wales, according to Robert Gerrard, the site's A350 manufacturing and integration manager.

The site is currently working on wings for 10 A350s at a time as Airbus ramps up production to what will be its highest ever level for a wide-body plane. The factory handed over 72 A350 wingsets last year, and is now working on aircraft number 144, Mr Gerrard said. The next milestone will be to incorporate a "twist" in the 900's wings that is being introduced with the 1000 to fine-tune the geometrical assembly of some wing components, he said.

Airbus delivered 49 A350s in 2016, plus the first two test models, versus a target of 50, after accelerating handovers from 12 in the first half, when they were held up by delays at the seat and interiors supplier Zodiac Aerospace. That issue is now easing, said the chief operating officer Fabrice Brégier.

Airbus has won orders for 818 A350s, of which 599 are for the 900 variant, which had its first delivery, also to Qatar Air, in late 2014, and 211 for the 1000. Eight orders remain listed for the 800, which the company has opted not to build, and may be transferred to the other models.

A350 deliveries are slated to reach 10 a month by the end of 2018 and 13 per month in subsequent years.

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