

Boeing 787 Dreamliner makes maiden passenger flight after three-year delay

First commercial flight lands on time in Hong Kong, but doubts remain over plane's viability after troubled arrival on market

Justin McCurry on board Flight NH7871
guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 26 October 2011 12.30 BST

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It has been running three years late, but on Wednesday in Hong Kong, Boeing's 787 Dreamliner arrived on schedule, touching down at the end of a maiden commercial flight that some believe will usher in a new era of fuel-efficient civil flight.

The All Nippon Airways (ANA) Flight NH7871 left Tokyo shortly after noon, arriving four hours and eight minutes later to be greeted by traditional dance and music, but also doubts about its viability. The plane will return to Japan on Thursday before going into proper commercial service on two of ANA's domestic routes.

The 264 passengers included scores of journalists, Boeing and ANA executives, aviation enthusiasts, and a Florida couple who paid thousands of dollars to be aboard. Boeing officials say the aircraft, which is made of lightweight materials, is 20% more fuel-efficient than conventional airliners and 30% cheaper to maintain, and features design improvements for more comfortable medium- and long-haul flights.

Scott Fancher, the head of the 787 programme, said the Dreamliner was a "game changer" for commercial aviation. "It sets a new standard in the design of commercial aircraft," he said. "It is truly graceful, with an interior to complement this. The travelling public will soon get to experience it. We have designed a plane that will change the direction of commercial aviation."

Fancher was speaking days after China Eastern Airlines cancelled its order for 24 Dreamliners, while Air New Zealand voiced concern at missed delivery deadlines and said it would seek compensation from Boeing. Design problems and production delays have left \$16bn (£10bn) worth of hardware on Boeing assembly lines. The firm currently

has orders for 821 Dreamliners, a 10th of them from Japan, which designed and built 35% of the aircraft's structure.

Fancher refused to comment on the China Eastern's decision, insisting: "Today is a day to celebrate the Dreamliner's first passenger flight." He said Boeing was comfortable with its production target of 10 aircraft a month by 2013, but added: "It is always a challenge to increase production, and our teams are executing those plans. If we get the plane out there, people will see its performance and economic benefits and the orders will come."

ANA's chief executive, Shinichiro Ito, reiterated his commitment to the Dreamliner, while acknowledging that the wait for delivery had been "hard at times".

The Japanese carrier expects to take delivery of 20 aircraft by the end of March 2013 and to launch its first long-haul service, between Tokyo and Frankfurt, by the end of the year. The first US airline to fly the 787 will be United Continental, which plans to fly the plane between Houston and Auckland, New Zealand, starting in the second half of next year.

Aviation experts say "hundreds" of 787s would already be in operation had it not been for production glitches. The resulting delivery delays may have handed an advantage to Boeing's European rival, Airbus.

But others said the aircraft would thrive, despite its troubled arrival on the market.

Paul Sheridan, of the global aviation consultancy Ascend, said: "The long delays to the 787 programme have not changed our positive view of the aircraft. Airlines are, if anything, even more keen to get their hands on the aircraft.

"The advanced technology used in the 787 means that, in spite of the delays, it is still ahead of its time. The size and range of the aircraft offers airlines the ability to open new long-haul routes linking a range of cities that would have been uneconomic with other aircraft types in the market."

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