EXECUJET FIXED AS A NEW FORCE

News / Business aviation

Switzerland-based **ExecuJet** has come a long way since it started out in South Africa in the 90s. Yet its heart is still in Africa, as Ettori Poggi told Ian Sheppard.

When news broke unexpectedly last year that ExecuJet would be acquired by Luxaviation- CMI Group it put the Swiss company at the centre of the new wave of consolidation many had said was well overdue in business aviation.

With a chain of fixed-base operators (FBOs) – essentially VIP terminals with their own hangars for corporate and private aircraft – the company had become a force to be reckoned with in its own right.

Meanwhile, Luxaviation had already acquired Abelag of Germany and London Executive Aviation, to create one of the largest concerns of its kind in the world.

But, given all this excitement, what plans does ExecuJet, which has retained its brand and identity, have in store for Africa?

As Ettore Poggi, vice president Africa and director maintenance, ExecuJet Group, said, it has already established bases other than its main African facility, which is situated at Lanseria Airport, near Johannesburg.

The Cape Town facility, which I visited in February, opened in 2009 and Lagos, Nigeria opened in 2012.

But what of maintenance, given the lack of support infrastructure for business aircraft across Africa?

In this respect, ExecuJet represents a shining light of hope. “There are many maintenance

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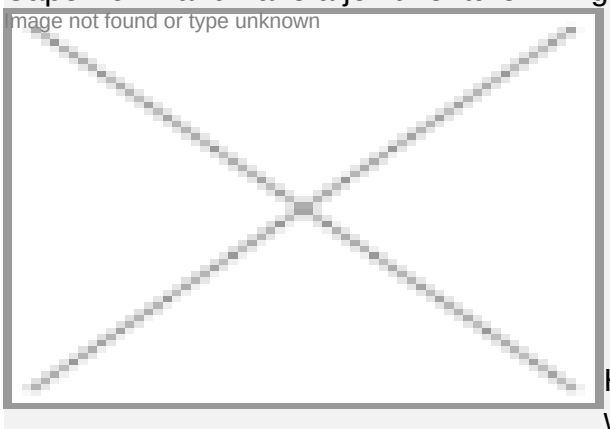
facilities in Africa but few specialise in large business jets," said Poggi. "That is, being able to service not only turboprops, but long-range large-cabin business jets from overseas.
"I can say proudly we are one of the few, if not the only, discounting the likes of Ethiopian Airlines. It's really just been us at Lanseria for the past 20 years, and more recently we've opened up in Cape Town and have a joint venture in Nigeria, with Quits Aviation."



He said that the ExecuJet facilities were busy "because we represent most of the original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) – Bombardier, Dassault, Gulfstream – and we are already attracting aircraft from outside the region, from far afield as Europe, and find [Africa-based] aircraft come here when they used to prefer to go to Europe. And in Cape Town, specifically, we are also focusing on, for example, Dash 8s and CRJs for the airlines too."
He continued by noting that lots of the OEMs focus on West Africa "thinking that's going to be where the boom is".
So with three FBOs, what other opportunities exist in Africa, given that there is demand? "If I were to accept and take forward every offer I could probably have one every 20km," joked Poggi. "But it's a big investment. You also need a local partner as you need local knowledge."
This is the approach ExecuJet has taken in Nigeria – and Poggi admits that if anywhere is on its radar as the next best place, it is Angola, with the proviso that, "I don't think the demand is there quite yet."
He also cautioned: "If we open up another in close proximity it might detract from what we're doing already. And I'd be hesitant to say that we could open up an FBO as big as Lanseria and get a profit within two years."
While the maintenance activities support the FBO operations, there are also opportunities for other work, said Poggi. "We've just finished an upgrade of a King Air to full glass cockpit, Garmin 1000, on time – and the customer is happy. We may see more of that kind of upgrades while the currency [South African Rand] is still weak. And the indications are that it's not going to improve."
There is a similar situation in Nigeria, where in recent months the Naira currency has gone up from 150 making one $US so that it is now 200.

"That has cost implications – spares and labour in particular," said Poggi. So in the MRO field ExecuJet is "spreading our net to attract more customers" while also developing the local skills base in Nigeria, as it has in South Africa. "Until then we have to pay in US dollars."

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