

BAHRAIN AIR SHOW: Comlux move boosts Bahrain

By Murdo Morrison



In a boost for Bahrain's efforts to rival Abu Dhabi and Dubai as a business aviation hub for the Middle East, the biggest Airbus corporate jet operator, Comlux, is to set up a business in the kingdom in partnership with MAZ Aviation of Saudi Arabia.

The Swiss-based company will house an A319-based ACJ and an A318 Elite in Bahrain and it will be joined at the end of the year by an A320 Prestige, which is undergoing completion in Comlux's centre in Indianapolis.

Comlux chief executive Stephen Laven says that the move will allow the company to "cut down on response times" to its customers in the region, who, together with central Asia, account for about two-thirds of its charter business. Laven also says that the arrival of competition in the market - from new ACJ operator Al Jaber Aviation - helped prompt the decision to set up the business.

The company chose Bahrain over Dubai or Abu Dhabi - where most business aviation operators are based - because of its closeness to Saudi Arabia, the region's biggest market, and the northern Gulf states of Kuwait and Qatar, which are developing a taste for business aviation.

Comlux is partnering MAZ, says Laven, because "it is important to have local relationships. It is not just about opening a sales office."

Comlux, which also operates a fleet of mostly Bombardier Globals, says demand for top-end Airbus and Boeing business jets has remained stronger throughout the downturn than for smaller business aircraft. Driven by ultra-high-net-worth individuals and governments in the resource-rich nations of the Middle East and central Asia, it "has never really dwindled", says Laven.

Also at the show, fellow Swiss-based private charter operator PrivatAir announced it was setting up a Middle Eastern division in Bahrain. The new entrants are joining Bahrain-owned Bexair and recent start-up Mena Aviation in the kingdom's growing business aviation presence.