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South Florida emerging as a leading flight-training location

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handout

The Boeing training facility in Virginia Gardens.

Call it Florida's "Sim City."

Clustered along Northwest 36th Street in the area along Miami International Airport's northern border are the companies and schools that house most of South Florida's 62 FAA-approved airline flight simulators. Private and commercial pilots, and many aviation professionals, learn and hone their craft on the devices, which re-create the experience of aircraft flight. Only Atlanta, with 64, and the Dallas-Fort Worth area, with 122, currently have more.

In South Florida, three companies dominate the pilot-training landscape. As of Aug. 1, Airbus and Boeing, the world's largest aircraft manufacturers, and Pan Am International Flight Academy had a total of 53 simulators at their training centers on Northwest 36th Street. That number may rise — pushing the region's prominence higher — as Boeing concentrates all its North American flight and maintenance training at its Virginia Gardens campus.

"I don't think there's any other place in the world that has that many "sims" in three-mile radius," said Gregory Darrow, senior director of sales and marketing at Pan Am International Flight Academy, the third of the trio. The price of a full-motion flight simulator generally ranges from \$20 million to \$30 million. "We just brought in two new [Boeing] 777 sims and a 747-400 sim," said Darrow.

As these and other companies with South Florida facilities grow, so does the region's reputation as a leading flight-training location. And while the "Big Three" companies with facilities on Northwest 36th Street are the giants on the pilot-training landscape, there are also many other contenders — from small private schools to college campuses — throughout South Florida as well as near MIA..

Some industry experts, noting the strong job prospects for pilots in many parts of the globe, foresee more visitors at South Florida training sites. Area hotels and businesses would benefit, they add. They remark on the sophistication and variety of training opportunities; slightly more than half of South Florida flight simulators are "Level D"

models, for instance — the kind that qualify pilots to land an aircraft without requiring an actual flight test.

Less optimistic, however, are observers who also look at the increasing costs and requirements of gaining a pilot's license. For them, the training industry faces the prospect of a bumpy ride.

BIG THREE

Boeing had considered consolidating its North American training in Atlanta or Seattle but picked the Miami area instead, said Bob Bellitto, global sales leader of Boeing Flight Services, the company's training unit.

"We're going to add more than \$100 million worth of simulators and devices this year, which basically doubles our investment in the [Miami] campus. So it's very significant," Bellitto said. "Miami is a hub for commercial shipping traffic as well as commercial aviation traffic. It's a natural location [for training]. It's kind of the centerline of the Americas."

Both tourism and transportation benefit: Bellitto and others say that visitors to the training centers who stay about eight nights will generate an estimated 38,000 room-nights a year at local hotels after Boeing fully consolidates its North American training in South Florida, scheduled for completion by the year's end.

At the Boeing flight training center near Miami International Airport, as of Aug. 1, there were 15 flight simulators; the company expects to have a total of 17 simulators there by the end of the year. Boeing this year already has moved two full-motion flight simulators for its new 787 Dreamliner, among other models, from Seattle to its training center in Virginia Gardens.

Just east of Boeing's 134,000-square-foot training center on Northwest 36th Street is the 110,000-square-foot flight and maintenance training center of its rival, Airbus.

The company's growth is partly fueled by its increasing share of the commercial aircraft market in Latin America, said Joe Houghton, vice president of training and flight operations support in the Americas for Airbus.

"It's just going gangbusters for us," Houghton said. "There's an expansion that needs to happen."

At the Airbus training center in Miami, "we still have some room to grow."

Northwest 36th Street in Miami also is the home of Pan Am International Flight Academy, the original training division of the old Pan American Airways.

Its flagship facilities in Miami currently feature full-motion flight simulators, 31 types of jet aircraft ranging from the Airbus A330, and the McDonnell-Douglas MD-80 to the Boeing 747, 767 and 777. The school also has U.S. training centers for airline pilots in Denver, Las Vegas, Memphis and Minneapolis.

The presence of Airbus, Boeing and Pan Am International distinguish the pilot instruction ecosystem of Miami from smaller clusters of flight training schools and facilities in most U.S. cities.

When Boeing completes its consolidation of North American training in Miami, “this is going to be their largest flight training facility in the world,” said James Kohnstamm, vice president, economic development, at the Beacon Council, the economic development agency of Miami-Dade County.

The Airbus flight training center in Miami is the only one in the Americas and one of only five in the world, and “we hope to see some growth from them in the future” at the Northwest 36th Street location, Kohnstamm said. “They have some opportunities for growth on adjacent properties.”

Pan Am also could get busier soon. Tokyo-based ANA Group, parent company of All Nippon Airways, announced July 30 a definitive agreement to acquire the Miami-based flight training school from its owner, American Capital Ltd., for \$139.5 million. The acquisition by ANA, which closed Thursday, means “we’ll be expanding dramatically in Asia,” Darrow said.

TRAINING SCHOOLS

Some airline pilots who train in South Florida earned college degrees just up the road on I-95 at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach.

“We train some of the best pilots in America. Twenty-five percent of all the professional pilots in the United States are trained at Embry-Riddle,” said John P. Johnson, president of the private university. Embry-Riddle students who earn four-year degrees in aeronautical science and become airline pilots learn much more than how to fly a plane. “We’re not a flight school. We’re not a flight training program,” Johnson said. “Six of our graduates are U.S. astronauts.”

Flight training schools found near South Florida’s airports are usually more down to earth. They provide instruction for the initial levels of pilot certification, and they usually offer more than just flying lessons. Typically they train students at general aviation airports on propeller-driven planes while operating such sideline businesses as aircraft rentals, sales of pilot supplies, air tours and aerial photography.

At Wayman Flight Training, for example, aircraft rentals supplement revenue from pilot instruction.

Wayman Eduardo Luy, general manager and part-owner of the flight training school, based at the Opa-locka Executive Airport, said that “the vast majority of our business is training ... We’re flying a fleet of 14 airplanes right now. We’re pretty busy. Miami is a huge flight training center.”

Many of his students are foreign nationals who work abroad as pilots after obtaining certification in Miami.

“We’re training them here and shipping them off to South America or Asia,” Luy said.

Foreign students must register with the Transportation Security Administration, or TSA, which is one of the biggest changes at flight training schools since the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001.

“Anyone who is not a U.S. citizen is required to register with the TSA for a background check to make sure you’re not a terrorist,” Luy said. “And of course, if you’re not a U.S. citizen, you need a visa.”

The Federal Aviation Administration lists 75 FAA-approved pilot schools in Florida on its Website, including 24 in South Florida. Among them are Broward College and Miami-Dade College, which provide classroom training and farm out in-flight training to private schools. In addition, many so-called “non-approved” schools operate legally and effectively without meeting FAA standards for curricula, personnel, equipment and facilities. However, the FAA requires students of nonapproved schools to obtain 40 hours of in-flight training for a private pilot certification, compared with 35 hours at approved schools.

Helicopter training requires substantially more time in the air.

Helicopter Academy, based at the North Perry Airport in Hollywood, provides 300 hours of in-flight training, said manager Tom McDermott. Students of the FAA-approved school who have learned to fly a fixed-wing plane need more flight time to master a helicopter. “You’re basically going from a tricycle to a unicycle,” McDermott said, “from something that’s basically stable to something that’s basically unstable.”

Many more hours of in-flight training are required to become a co-pilot, or first officer, with a major commercial airline. The FAA recently increased the minimum to 1,500 hours from 1,000 hours, with certain exceptions for institutions that offer more than basic flying lessons. For example, the minimum remains 1,000 hours for graduates of aeronautical science programs like the one at Embry-Riddle. “If you earn a four-year college degree, then you only need 1,000 hours of flight time,” said Bob Rockmaker, president of the Allentown, Pa.-based Flight School Association of North America.

Pilots commonly work their way into airline jobs by working as instructors for flight training schools, collecting pay rather than paying to accumulate in-flight hours. But that career path has narrowed. Rockmaker said there are about 1,500 flight training schools in the United States, down from about 2,400 before the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001, perpetrated by a group of passenger-jet hijackers that included several foreign nationals who attended Florida flight schools.

“The whole flight training industry was pretty much shut down for a while” after the 9/11 attacks, Rockmaker said. “There were schools that never reopened, and there were many schools that were closed for 30, 60, 90 days because of all the challenges, the problems, the checking by the security folks that needed to check on them.”

Vocational credit availability has been a more recent challenge for flight training schools.

SLM Corp., better known as “Sallie Mae,” is a former government-sponsored provider of education loans that became a private company in 2004 and subsequently stopped lending to students of most flight schools. “Almost every flight school in the country lost their relationship with Sallie Mae,” Rockmaker said.

“The big driving force is the cost, and it can be pretty expensive, especially when you’re buying the flight time,” said Tom Jargiello, director of the Eig-Watson School of Aviation at Miami Dade College. “You’re looking at years and thousands of dollars before you can actually sit there and pilot a commercial plane.” MDC students who pursue a two-year associate degree in professional pilot technology can expect to pay more than \$30,000 for flying lessons alone plus the cost of tuition, books and other expenses.

Yet despite the high cost of becoming an airline captain or first officer, job opportunities for pilots appear ample, especially abroad.

Boeing last year forecast worldwide demand for 460,000 additional commercial airline pilots by 2032, including 185,600 in China alone. Boeing will release an update of its annual forecast of global demand for pilots and aircraft mechanics during the public event Thursday at its Miami training center.

“There’s a huge pilot shortage right now. There’s an estimated 300,000 pilots that are needed across the world,” said Bellitto, the Boeing executive. “Countries like China and India need more and more pilots as they’re developing their industries,” and in the United States, “the baby boomers are retiring, and Vietnam-era pilots that were trained in the military are retiring.”