



CNN Business Traveller

Airbus delivers its first-ever airliner assembled in the U.S.

By Chris Sloan of AirwaysNews.com for CNN

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Mobile, Alabama (CNN) — Just three years after Airbus broke ground on its Mobile, Alabama, factory, the company has reached a major milestone, delivering its first ever airliner assembled in the U.S. Dubbed, "BluesMobile," JetBlue's new A321ceo airliner rolled out Monday in front of an enthusiastic crowd of employees, JetBlue customers, VIPs and locals.

"Today is aviation history," said Jeff Martin, JetBlue executive vice president of operations.

Assembly line workers marched together with the University of South Alabama marching band chanting, "Here we go JetBlue, here we go!"

"We never thought we'd see Airbus airplanes being built in the U.S. in my lifetime," said John Leahy, Airbus chief operating officer -- customers.

Airbus' decision to begin rolling out single-aisle airliners in the backyard of its biggest competitor -- U.S.-based Boeing -- raised eyebrows in 2012.



Photos: Airbus A380 through the years

Less than a year later, it broke ground on the \$600 million facility.

"It's a testament to how well executed this project was and how strong the teamwork has been here in Mobile and throughout Airbus," Leahy said.

JetBlue CEO Robin Hayes said the plane is called BluesMobile "as a living memory of this historic event."



He took a moment to highlight the existing relationship the airline has with Airbus.

"We talk a lot about long term partnership. Airbus truly believed in us when we were getting the airline off the ground."

Employees and guests in Mobile, Alabama, on Monday gather around BluesMobile, the first Airbus assembled in the U.S.

Hayes also thanked the Airbus team. "You have done an amazing job building an incredible airplane," he said. "Every time we touch it, we think of you."

Leahy presented a gift to JetBlue to commemorate the event, an oil painting of BluesMobile soaring the skies.

There are nine other A320 family aircraft in production at the facility. Eight of these will be delivered to American Airlines and one to Spirit Airlines. All will be A321s.

Airbus anticipates delivering four aircraft per month from the Mobile plant by the end of 2017. The initial deliveries will be A320 family aircraft with the current engine option, but will begin transitioning to new engine option derivatives in late 2017.

From Hamburg to Mobile

The story of this first Airbus aircraft built in the U.S. begins on the other side of the pond.

In early June 2015, the fuselage sections of the aircraft were shipped to the United States from Hamburg, Germany, together with 4,000 other parts.

Some 40% of the aircraft was built with parts from U.S. suppliers, as well as the engines.



Although the major components transported to the United States are shipped from Hamburg, these come from different countries in Europe.

Photos: Airplane seat patents

Final assembly of the first aircraft began in mid-July 2015, when the main fuselage sections were placed in the transshipment hangar.

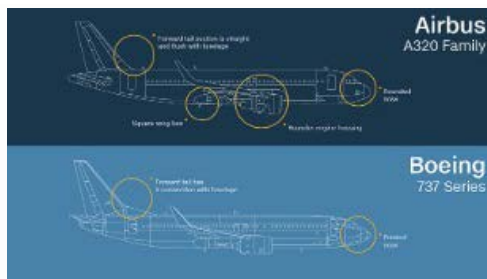
There, the major component assemblies are sent to the final assembly line, which is divided into five work stations.

The first station, known as Station 41, is where the forward and aft sections of the fuselage are joined. This is also where internal elements such as monuments and galleys are installed.

The second, Station 40, is where the wings and the fuselage are joined.

At the time when the final assembly line was inaugurated, the wing and fuselage mating works were underway and completed in October 2015.

Immediately thereafter, the aircraft was sent to Station 35 where the airplane powers on its own. Vertical and horizontal tail planes are assembled here and the wings are completed.



The auxiliary power unit (APU) is also installed in this station and the installation of the cabin furnishing begins.

The nose cone and radome are added here and landing gear functions are checked.

Photos: What's the big difference?

Lighting, in-flight entertainment, and cabin pressurization systems are installed and tested here as well. The aircraft finally entered the final phase / flight line station, where engines are installed, along with final testing before the aircraft returns outside and is sent to the paint shop.

Last October, Airbus announced plans to ramp up production of its A320 family of aircraft before the end of the decade. It was a move supported by record numbers of firm orders, amid strong global demand for the type.

Airbus expects to increase the rate to 52 planes per month by 2018, supported by its final production lines in Germany, France, China, and the United States.

Get set, ready... fly!

Back on February 24, the nearly completed BluesMobile rolled out from the final assembly line, and was sent to the paint shop for to receive the JetBlue livery.

The paint hangar has an area of 27,700 sq feet (2,574 square meters) and will be capable of painting all A320 family aircraft -- A318, A319, A320 and A321s equipped with sharklets and NEO options.

The aircraft soared the skies for the first time last March 24, with test pilots Mark McCullins and Bruce Macdonald, flight test engineers Thierry Cros and Nick Picconi, and ground test engineers/cabin specialists Alexander Gentsch and Mike Johns.

The flight lasted three hours and 26 minutes, during which standard tests were performed on systems, engines and structure.

The aircraft climbed as high as 39,000 feet (11,887 meters), Airbus said. Pilots performed dynamic flight checks and electrical system tests as the jetliner ascended to 31,000 feet (9,449 meters).

'Without Airbus, JetBlue wouldn't be JetBlue'

"JetBlue received the honor of being the first U.S. delivery customer in large part to the partnership dating back to the beginning." JetBlue EVP Martin said.

BluesMobile is JetBlue's 29th A321, of which 13 are "mint" configured, he said. It's the 130th A320 family aircraft to join the fleet.

"Without Airbus, JetBlue wouldn't be JetBlue," Martin said.

"The A321 core aircraft has been a success due to its lower seat costs and being a proven platform." said Martin. To date, JetBlue's A321 fleet has a 98% of dispatch reliability and averages 15 hours per day of utilization.

Aboard the delivery flight

AirwaysNews boarded Monday's delivery flight, which was commanded by Capt. Rick Smith.

The flight's First Officer was Capt. Bart Robert, JetBlue's vice president of flight. Capt. Smith was joined on the flight deck by his father and wife, who flies as a flight attendant for JetBlue.

The aircraft was delivered with a 190-seat "core configured" layout, with new ergonomic B/E Aerospace Pinnacle seats.

In recent years, JetBlue has focused on keeping customers connected throughout their flights, including free gate-to-gate Fly-Fi high-speed Internet, high-definition seatback televisions, and in-seat power outlets with USB ports.

All of these features will be offered on this A321.

About the incorporation of this A321 to the fleet, Martin said the Fly-Fi and in-flight entertainment installation, which takes place at HAECO in Lake City, Florida, takes approximately 1-2 weeks.

Martin expects that in 14 days, the aircraft will enter revenue service.

He also announced that the first flight will start flying routes either at the airport in Orlando or Ft. Lauderdale.

Upon arrival in Lake City, BluesMobile, tail number N965JT, the first Airbus airliner built in America -- was immediately whisked into a hangar to begin its JetBlue career.

Chris Sloan is the president and founder of AirwaysNews.com.