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THE JET-ETTE SET LIGHT 'MINI' SOARS AS NEW STATUS SYMBOL

By **BRENDAN SCOTT**

September 30, 2007 -- Move over, McMansions - the latest status symbol is the McJet.

Nicknamed the "mini," a new generation of aircraft rolling off the assembly lines is making luxury plane rides within reach of every investment banker, doctor or lawyer.

Priced between \$1.4 million and \$3 million - about the same range as a four-bedroom house in Westchester - the very light jets or VLJs can carry six and top out at 427 mph, but have a range of just 1,250 miles.

Most larger jets go for anywhere from \$4 million to \$40 million, reach 600 mph and boast intercontinental range.

But the price speaks to a new generation of flight snobs and pilot wannabes. Plane makers Eclipse and Cessna began delivering VLJs earlier this year. About 350 are operating now and 2,300 are on order. By 2020, when other aviation companies enter the market, an estimated 10,000 will be in the air.

The minis have state-of-the-art communications and navigation equipment that could make them safer than the propeller-driven planes. Plus, jet travel allows pilots to fly high above the weather and terrain that play into many plane crashes.

That's the thrill David Kleinman has been waiting 30 years for. The 49-year-old software engineer from Bedford Hills in Westchester traded in his turboprop Beech Bonanza three years ago to make way for the Eclipse 500 he's expected to get in the next few weeks.

Kleinman says he's spending time in a simulator to prepare. He also plans to participate in the mentoring program the manufacturer offers to bring new pilots up to speed.

Though it signed off on the new models, the Federal Aviation Administration is in a state of high anxiety about the volume of jets being sold at these prices that make them affordable to many more millionaires.

The agency is worried the skies could soon be filled with part-time jet pilots whose skills don't match their fast-flying machines.

"This unprecedented pace of change is the source of substantial concern about the possibility of new risks being introduced into air taxis, business aviation and personal operations," Robert Matthews, a senior FAA safety analyst told a gathering of air safety investigators last month in Singapore.

Other experts agree.



Eclipse 500 XL

Erik Hildebrandt

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"You're going to get pilots who simply don't have the experience and training to support these quicker aircraft," said Brian Alexander, an aviation lawyer with Kreindler & Kreindler in Manhattan. "They'll be in over their heads."

And VLJs, like other small planes, can be flown by solitary pilots. So they'll have fewer hands on the controls and less eyes on the skies.

"Aviation has never experienced as rapid a change in the fleet or in business models as VLJs promise to deliver," Matthews told the investigators.

Licensed pilots must get certified to fly jets, but the FAA doesn't mandate further training.

Flying a jet "is really not that much of a step up," said Kleinman, who has logged 2,700 hours at the controls in propeller-driven planes. "A lot of it comes down to experience."

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