

RAF-AVIA: The Latvian link



New Latvian airline member RAF-AVIA has an established reputation as a cargo and express mail airline, with long-standing relationships with DHL and TNT.

We talk to the airline about its recent developments, including the re-introduction of passenger operations

RAF-AVIA has been operating in Latvia since October 1990, and was first established as the aviation unit of a minibus manufacturing company in order to supply its assembly line with parts on time. In 1991, its first AN-26 aircraft was delivered and during the first year of operation two aircraft flew 72 hours a month, 865 hours in total. The aviation unit solely served the needs of the manufacturing company until December 1994 when the air unit became an independent aviation enterprise – the joint stock company A/S RAF-AVIA. Since then, the airline has operated flights on a long- and short-term contract basis working with companies such as DHL, TNT, BDA Night Express, Air Charter Service, Chapman Freeborn, NEO charter service, PROAIR and many others. In 2004, RAF-AVIA received accreditation to the United Nations World Food Program to render its services. The company has had no accidents, near accidents, or serious incidents in over 20 years of operation. Last year, the airline flew 4,500 hours.

RAF-AVIA's Chairman of the Board is Valery Bolotnov, with Juris Hmelevskijs as Accountable Manager. The company has a staff of 100 in total, including 45 flying personnel, 35 maintenance personnel and 20 office staff. RAF-AVIA holds the EASA Part-145 Maintenance Organisation Approval Certificate and provides line and base maintenance for AN26 and SAAB340 and line maintenance for ATR72.

Currently, RAF-AVIA has a total fleet of nine aircraft, comprised of four Antonov 26 aircraft, two SAAB 340a freighters, one ATR 72 freighter and two SAAB 340B passenger aircraft. The company is also in the process of acquiring a second ATR 72 freighter, which is scheduled to arrive in January 2018. Five of the aircraft are being operated for DHL.

What kind of cargo do you transport?

We transport express mail on DHL routes. When operating charter flights, we transport everything from automobiles and oil equipment to live animals (we have previously transported chicks, dogs and dolphins). We also transport some dangerous goods, including dry ice and sometimes radioactive materials, for which we have special licence.

Why did you decide to expand into passenger operations? How easy was that change to make?

The expansion into passenger operations was actually just a renewal of these operations after a break of 11 years. The new owners of the airline laid out a comprehensive plan for RAF-AVIA's development. It included improvements in existing services as well as implementation of new ones. In 2016, two SAAB 340B passenger aircraft were

acquired. Because there was a substantial break in passenger operations for us, the reintroduction of passenger aircraft and operations into our AOC took almost nine months. The new package of documents for passenger operations had to be created to allow us to expand our AOC. On 1 September 2016, we received our new AOC granting the rights for passenger operations.

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What do you currently see as the biggest challenges for aviation?

For us, the biggest challenge is our fleet upgrade. We are in the process of replacing our AN-26 for ATR 72s. The first ATR 72 freighter aircraft was registered in our AOC in August this year. We expect to add the second ATR 72 freighter to our fleet in January. The third ATR 72 will be in passenger configuration to supplement our existing two SAAB 340 passenger planes, in order to offer more choice to our customers. Going forward, we are currently evaluating market potential in Europe and the Nordic region.

Why have you decided to join ERA and what benefits do you think it will bring?

We are absolutely sure that our voice can only be heard when together with other similar regional airlines, which are considered as partners. Our membership of ERA provides us with the potential to exchange positive experiences and promote good practices in the aviation market.

We are sure that ERA, as a representative of the majority of European airlines, has a much stronger position as an organisation in promoting airlines' interests among aviation authorities of the European Union than any airline individually. ■

