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TAKE THIS WALTZ

Amid the celebrations for its 10th anniversary, Austria's International Jet Management has found a new dance partner in Bombardier's Challenger aircraft.

BY MICHAEL JOHNSON | PHOTOS BY GUNNAR KNECHTEL



AT YOUR SERVICE
(Above, left to right) IJM managing director Robert Schmörlzer; flight routes are tracked at IJM offices; (opposite page) the technical team perform maintenance on a Challenger 850 jet.

The Viennese Waltz: One of the oldest ballroom dances in existence, its beauty lies in its consistency, with the spotlight shining less on individual flair and more on the fluidity of the whole experience. It's fitting, then, that just south of the birthplace of the Viennese Waltz, Austria's International Jet Management (IJM) is celebrating 10 years of aircraft management – a business where success hinges on dependability and discretion.

“For aircraft management companies in Europe, there's a steady come and go of operators,” says Robert Schmörlzer, managing director of IJM, which is also celebrating the addition of a Challenger 350 aircraft to its fleet of Bombardier business jets. “We've seen a lot of turnover in our industry, but we've reached a stage where we feel stable. Ten years in this business is pretty good.”

Smooth Operators

According to Schmörlzer, IJM's stability is tied to the reliability of its service, a trait that sits at the heart of the company's reputation. It helps that IJM's fleet includes a wide array of Bombardier business aircraft – Learjet, Challenger and Global jets – which they operate for customers all over the world. As Schmörlzer reveals, their very first customer switched over from a Cessna to a Learjet and never looked back, going on to acquire a Challenger 300, Challenger 605, Challenger 850 and finally a Global aircraft. “And that customer is still with us today.”

Customer retention has been another big part of IJM's remarkable success. “Barring the sale of an aircraft, we don't lose customers,” says Schmörlzer. “Our fleet doesn't fluctuate.”

Customer satisfaction was particularly vital early on, when the company's burgeoning reputation was generating new business – despite very little marketing. “In the first five years of IJM, we barely

advertised,” says CEO Felix Feller. “You couldn't even find us online! Virtually all our new business during those first years was referred.”

Born in Baden, Switzerland, Feller first earned his stripes as an engineer before entering the world of aircraft management as a pilot. He amassed over 13,000 flying hours working as a flight instructor and inspector whose type ratings included the Challenger 600, Challenger 601 and Challenger 604 aircraft. Having already built and sold a jet management firm in Switzerland, Feller knows all too well that, in the world of business aircraft management, it's often what's left unseen that is the most important: “Our customers want to keep a low profile, and we respect that.”

Even a decade later, in the wake of this major achievement, Feller maintains that the best possible customer service experience is one where the customer isn't thinking about IJM – because the operation is running so smoothly.

“After the initial request for an ad-hoc flight, the best interaction with us is, frankly, no interaction at all,” says Schmörlzer. “Let's say a customer from Moscow, one of our most important markets, must fly at the last minute to a meeting in New York. IJM will take care not only of the flight but also customs, in-flight service, the whole package. In this regard it's probably best that the customer doesn't have to think about us. Everything is behind the scenes. We are only in direct contact with our customers if something's wrong and they need to be involved. Which is rare, of course!”

Feller couldn't agree more. “In German, as in English, we like to say ‘No news is good news!’”

Powerful Partnership

The addition of a Challenger 350 jet to IJM's fleet came as a result of a longstanding relationship with a customer in Denmark, who sometimes works for IJM as a pilot. “It was December 2013, >



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– FELIX FELLER, CEO

during our Christmas party,” Schmölzer recalls. The customer shared the news that he would be taking delivery of a Challenger 350 jet the following year and wanted IJM to manage it for both owner and charter operations.

The Challenger 350 aircraft suits the region because it connects Austria directly with all of Europe and the Middle East, says Schmölzer, who got his start in jet management ten years ago at a firm with a large fleet of Challenger jets. IJM has long been a supporter of the Challenger 300 jet, having seen it steadily emerge as a leading business aircraft among both charter customers and owners. Charter customers tend to favor its conference-friendly cabin design, while owners are fond of the aircraft’s reliability – not to mention its return on investment and high resale value. Adds Schmölzer, “I think it’s also a lifestyle thing. There is prestige in operating a Challenger aircraft.”

The reputation of the Challenger 300 jet in Austria bodes well for the Challenger 350, which received full type certification from the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) in September 2014. Feller fully expects the business jet to have a bright future in Europe.

“The Challenger 350 jet comes at a point now where owners are thinking of next steps, perhaps replacing a plane,” says Feller, “but they want to stay within the product line. They’ve flown many years with a Challenger 300, so they immediately turn to the Challenger 350 jet. It’s logical progress, a familiar experience. The Challenger 300 that they know so well, only with improvements in performance, especially avionics.”

The new, more dynamic avionics of the Challenger 350 aircraft are designed to work in tandem with the pilot, anticipating and supporting the workload for a safer, more effective operation. For a company like IJM, whose commitment to reliability is unwavering, this development is a major boon. Aesthetically, Feller expects the Challenger 350 jet to be especially popular among IJM’s charter customers, who prefer the latest and most prestigious aircraft available.

“Bombardier seems to be the only Original Equipment Manager [OEM] with such a diverse fleet portfolio,” says Schmölzer, commenting on the companies’ growing partnership. “Other OEMs might only offer a certain size or class. That works well if you’re looking to specialize, but Bombardier allows us to increase our service offering as the owner grows up with the OEM.”

IJM has seen a number of its customers “grow up” with Bombardier. “A Learjet owner, for example, might move on to a Challenger 604, and then eventually progress to a Global 6000 aircraft,” says Schmölzer. “That kind of vertical relationship with an OEM is rare, and it helps us better guide jet owners as their experience and goals mature.”

As IJM celebrates its 10th anniversary, the company is taking confident but careful steps into new markets around the globe. In 2014 they opened up shop in Hong Kong, and this year they are planning expansions into both the United States and the Middle East.

“Nothing will happen unless every move is calculated, though,” says Feller. “Every IJM facility must mirror the quality and experience of our company here in Austria.” The steps may be new, but it’s the same dance: clean and consistent. And so the waltz goes on. ■



TEAM PLAYERS
(Clockwise from top left) IJM’s ground team; a Challenger 350 aircraft and its digital maintenance manual.