

L'Avion:

Gallic Air Flair
across the Atlantic

by Luigi Vallero
all photos by A'Avion



L'Avion is the name of the latest all-business class service operating over the North Atlantic (*News from the Airways*, March 2007). Following the examples of similar ventures in Germany, the UK, Switzerland, and Italy—although MiMa (Milano Manhattan, *Airways*, December 2006) has already folded in the face of heavy competition from traditional carriers—the seemingly faddish development of elite airline transport has reached France as well.



Flights depart from Orly (Sud) daily except Saturday (when maintenance is performed) at 1400, arriving in Newark at 1645lt. Eastbound schedules (except Sunday) leave EWR at 1930, landing in Paris at 0840 the following day.

The gestation of such a service between Paris and New York has taken several years. In January 2002, Frantz Yvelin, a young engineer and pilot who had just returned from a long-haul business trip, began to explore the viability of providing a premium airline product at a reasonable price. He subsequently discussed the idea with others, including Alain Guedj—now the company’s financial director—and Christophe Viricelle, an experienced commercial pilot, before a decision was made to go ahead.

Thus, in February 2003, the new airline was born as Elysair. With the advice of Christophe Bejach, a highly regarded financier, the idea was refined and a feasibility study made. In July 2005 Marc Rochet, who had been an executive with Air Inter, Air Liberté, UTA, Minerve, and AOM (Air Outre Mer), lent his support with preparatory work for presentations to investors. By the end of that year the first financial agreements were finalized.

Speaking to *Airways*, Marc Rochet, now CEO, confirms that the Boeing 757-200 was selected as the best compromise in terms of capacity. Other aircraft were evaluated but rejected: the Airbus A319CJ and Boeing 737 (BBJ) were deemed too small for the potential market; the 767-200 was perceived as too large and costly to operate, and therefore too much of a financial risk for the new venture. However, the 757, with its proven reliability and ETOPS capability, as well as a roomy and comfortable cabin, presented the ideal size while retaining strong passenger appeal.

A 757 owned by Lufthansa Group subsidiary Condor was located, and by May 2006 a lease contract was signed with German Operating Aircraft Leasing (GOAL). Two months later, Elysair changed its corporate status, evolving into a simplified joint-stock company (SAS, or Société par action simplifiée), with capital of €25 million (\$32 million) and headquarters near Paris-Orly Airport.

The choice of Orly was not coincidental, as Rochet explains. Whereas today all major North Atlantic routes from Paris operate out of Charles de Gaulle Airport (CDG),



The Weber business class seats have a combination leather/fabric covering in grey and parma hues.



Orly (ORY) has the appeal of being closer to the city center. Obtaining suitable slots at ORY was not easy, as the airport is already quite congested and capacity-limited to 250,000 slots per year because of environmental issues. Finally, in September 2006, Elysair was allocated 12 weekly slots (six departures and six arrivals) for its proposed schedule to Newark Liberty International (EWR).

As with Orly, the choice of airport on the other side of the Atlantic was also arrived at after careful evaluation, the main criterion being to provide business travellers



The 757-200, fitted with Aviation Partners Boeing winglets, was delivered to Orly on November 8, 2006.

with maximum convenience, Newark being closer and more easily accessible from downtown Manhattan than John F Kennedy International Airport.

After surveys revealed that the name was well-received in the US market, L'Avion (literally 'The Airplane') was chosen by Elysair for a trading title.

The 757's refurbished interior, in bright and contrasting hues of white, gray, and pale violet, has only 90 seats, in contrast to a standard 757 cabin that usually accommodates between 180 and 220 passengers. L'Avion's aircraft features a comfortable 2-2 layout and a seat pitch of 1.20m (47in). Although not of the lie-flat type, the fabric- and leather-covered seats offer 140 degrees of recline, more than adequate for a trans-Atlantic stage lengths of between seven and eight hours. All seats have power outlets for personal computers.

L'Avion's first commercial flight took place on January 3, 2007. By February, load factors averaged between 45 to 50%, with about 70% of traffic originating in Paris.

Asked whether L'Avion has encountered difficulties thus far in competition with the majors—especially the mighty Air France/KLM Group and its SkyTeam partners—Rochet tells Airways that the city-pair market is large enough for his company to be perceived as only a minor irritant, catering as it does to point-to-point travellers, without so far provoking any aggressive reaction from incumbents.

L'Avion refers to its targeted customer base as 'Paryorkers': Parisians and New Yorkers who are usually city-to-city, full coach fare frequent travellers seeking a better overall travel experience without paying high business class fares charged by the majors. For example, L'Avion's fares start at €1,200 (\$1,500), including all applicable taxes, for a roundtrip.

Westbound, service includes lavish fare from renowned French caterer Servair, served individually on fine china, followed by a snack. Eastbound night flights offer dinner and breakfast. There is always a wide choice of drinks, including fine French wines and

FAST FACTS

L'Avion (Elysair dba)

IATA: A0 **ICAO:** AVI **Radio:** L'avion

Elysair SAS
5 allée du commandant Mouchotte
Bâtiment 519
Paray Vieille Poste
91781 Wissous Cedex
France

Tél: +33 (0)1 74 22 13 00
Fax: +33 (0)1 74 22 13 19

Website: www.lavion.com

Founded: 2003
License: February 22, 2006 (CSAM)
Incorporated: July 2006 (SAS)
Start date: January 3, 2007
CEO: Marc Rochet

Fleet Type	N°	Seats	Engines
Boeing 757-200	1	C90	PW2040



CEO Marc Rochet is a veteran of the French airline industry.

Champagne selected by renowned oenologist Frank Lucet. A good selection of magazines and newspapers, travel kits, and Polaire wool blankets are available. In-flight entertainment features individual digEplayer XT units with 20cm (8in) high-definition screens, with a wide choice of movies and music programs. On the ground, L'Avion passengers have access to business class lounges at both Orly and Newark.

Although L'Avion has yet to forge commercial agreements with other business class-only operators, it is likely that in the near future such ties could indeed be developed, allowing passengers to create open-jaw itineraries that, for example, originate in Paris and return from London, or vice versa.

The low-cost fare model which L'Avion has adopted is supported by rigorous cost-control. Currently, the airline has only 52 employees, comprising 12 pilots, 25 flight attendants, and 15 ground and administration personnel; all servicing and maintenance have been contracted to Lufthansa Technik.

Depending on traffic development in coming months, a second 757 may join the 'fleet', allowing L'Avion to increase frequencies to twice a day, while adding a second US destination—Boston. Plans call for the addition of service outside the USA, with Dubai and São Paulo both mentioned. →

(Airways thanks Marc Rochet, CEO of L'Avion, and Eric Fohlen-Weill, public relations manager, for their kind assistance with this article.)



L'Avion has made much effort to deliver friendly and enthusiastic service from a well-trained group of cabin attendants, who wear an attractive French haute couture-inspired uniform.