

The \$2 Million Personal Jet

by Mark Huber

BY THE END OF THIS YEAR, CIRRUS AIRCRAFT SHOULD HAVE FEDERAL Aviation Administration certification approval for its new, \$2 million, single-engine SF50 Vision—a five-to-seven-seat personal jet—and will commence deliveries to some 600 eager, albeit long-suffering, deposit holders.

I was in the hangar in Duluth, Minn., nine years ago when Cirrus first went public with the SF50, touting it as the slowest (300 knots), lowest (28,000 feet), and cheapest jet you could buy. They had been hard at work on the design at a secret off-site facility across town dubbed the Moose Works, in homage to Lockheed's Palmdale, Calif., Skunk Works, which cranked out legendary Cold War spy planes like the SR-71 Blackbird.

This is a big deal. Cirrus is best known, since the mid-1990s, for delivering some 6,000 of its SR20/22 single-engine piston airplanes. That series of aircraft was revolutionary for its glass cockpit displays, sidestick controls, all-composite construction, and whole-aircraft parachute systems credited with saving 134 lives to date. When a pilot runs out of options, he simply reaches up to the ceiling and pulls what is called the “oh s___ handle,” and a ballistic rocket fires a parachute out of the aft fuselage and lowers the entire aircraft gently to the ground.

The SR brought a level of situational awareness, robust construction, modern styling and ergonomics, and overall safety that had been largely absent from the small-plane market. Since 2004, the SR22 has been the world's best-selling single-engine, four-seat aircraft.

Cirrus' founders—brothers Alan and Dale Klapmeier—began tinkering with their innovative designs in the basement of a Baraboo, Wis., barn in 1984. Their first effort was a slick, single-engine, pusher-propeller, V-tailed speedster called the VK-30. While the initial plan to offer this hot rod to kit builders flopped, and a subsequent idea to offer a beefier version as a certified turboprop also cratered, it is the basic VK-30 design that spawned the current jet. In the late 1980s, the Klapmeier brothers approached small-jet engine maker Williams with the idea of fitting into a VK-30 an FJ44 turbofan—basically the power plant for Cessna's line of CJ CitationJets. It would take another 20 years for the idea to take hold.

Meanwhile, the mid-1990s saw the craze known as the very light jet—a new generation of jets weighing less than 10,000 pounds that needed only short runways to take off—and there was no shortage of dreamers willing to jump into the space: Comp Air, Diamond, Eclipse Aviation, Epic Air, Flaris, Maverick, Piper, Sport Jet, and Stratos. Most of these programs died long ago, and the same fate would have been Cirrus', had China Aviation Industry General Air-

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craft not bought the company in 2011 for an estimated \$210 million, minus debt. China Aviation properly capitalized the SF50 program, and over the years Cirrus improved the design, built more prototypes and production tooling, and began building a new customer center in Knoxville, Tenn.

The SF50 resembles a bulbous VK-30 and is easy to fly for anyone competent in a Cirrus SR-20/22. That explains why many deposit holders for the SF50 are existing Cirrus customers, including Dallas Mavericks head coach Rick Carlisle. Pilots will need to complete a jet-type rating course before climbing into the aircraft.

For a jet, the SF50 is slow and docile, and can actually be bested by some fast turboprops like the TBM 900. The maximum range of 1,250 nautical miles can be attained only by throttling back to 240 knots from the maximum speed of 300 knots, which will still take you 1,100 nautical miles. With full fuel (296 gallons), you can carry just 400 pounds, basically the pilot and one passenger or the pilot and a lot of gear. Carrying a load of four passengers and a pilot weighing 200 pounds each, the SF50 will take you an estimated 600 nautical miles at 300 knots.

Still, the SF50 promises to be a good short-field performer, taking off in as few as 2,036 feet and landing in 1,721 feet. Like Cirrus' piston aircraft, the SF50 features a whole-aircraft parachute. The interior fit and finish is excellent, with luxury-automotive-style details and options, such as leather seats, zoned climate controls, and USB charging ports. This is a lot of jet for just \$2 million, its low price point putting the dream of owning your own jet within reach of an entirely new market. ■

MARK HUBER reviews aircraft for Business Jet Traveler.

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Cirrus Aircraft's new SF50 Vision puts the dream of owning a personal jet within reach of a new market.

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