As happens with many AvGeeks, Russian-built aircraft have long held a certain fascination with me. It wasn't that long ago, from my home-base in Miami, that Aeroflot's IL-62s could be seen and heard shrieking across South Florida skies. Nearby Opa-locka Airport is home to several Russian freighters, namely AN-12s and a handful of AN-2s were flown here to a self-imposed exile by fleeing pilots from Cuba.

Cubana was the first operator of the wide-body Ilyushin Il-96 outside of Russia, and plans are to expand the fleet up to six with three ex Aeroflot aircraft to come. The aircraft seat 18 in Business "Tropical Class" and 244 in Economy.

Avialeasing's AN-12s are a common sight at Opa-locka Airport. (Photo Credits: Maarten Visser via Commons)
Cubana has four Tupolev Tu-204s in their fleet. The Boeing 757 look-alike Tu-204s were first delivered in 2007; 2 in passenger and 2 in cargo configuration. The passenger versions seat 12 in First and 212 economy.

**RELATED:** Flying Behind Cuba’s Coconut Curtain

**TRIP REPORT:** Flying The New Eastern Airlines to Cuba

To satiate this affliction and with the urging of some adventurous friends, I have made a positive though admittedly anxious step in booking a Merlin Tours trip to the DPPK later in the year, to sample flying things built in the former “USSairR”. In the meantime as a sort of airborne appetizer, I decided to embark on my first Russian onboard flying encounter.

My indoctrination into Russian airliners would be served in the form of the fascinatingly curious Russian / Italian regional aircraft that is known by various names: The Sukhoi Superjet, SSJ 100, Superjet International 100/95, Sukhoi 100, or any combination thereof. It has been sometimes derisively been nicknamed the “Embraerski”, “CSerieski”, or “ERJski” though the aircraft is hardly a facsimile of those. It is truly its own unique beast – an aircraft designed to appeal equally to Eastern and Western operators, and more specifically globally compete directly and favorably with the incumbents Embraer and Bombardier as well as new players on the scene like Mitsubishi.

**RELATED:** Battle of the Regionals and Future Prospects – CSeries vs ERJ vs MRJ vs SSJ

The SSJ 100 in its house livery colors. (Photo Credits: Superjet International)
The SSJ 100 is truly the first Russian aircraft built to be seriously marketed to airlines in the West and furthermore, being a partnership with a western company – Italy's Alenia Aermacchi. Sukhoi, a company known more for military then civil aircraft, chose to equip the aircraft with a broad compliment of Western technology and design from companies such a B/E Aerospace, Honeywell, Thales, Goodrich, with even Boeing serving as a consultant in the early days.

This East-meets-West arrangement extends to the SSJ's bespoke engines as well. The PowerJet SaM 146 are a joint venture between NPO Saturn of Russia and SNECMA of France. Though not "full on" Russian in the classic Tupolev, Antonov, Ilyushin, or Yakovlev sense, the bulk of the Superjet was designed in the East and the assembly line is located in the facilities of Komsomolsk-on-Amur Aircraft Production Association (KnAAPO) in the Russian Far East, while the completion center is located in Venice, Italy, where the passenger cabin and internal fittings are installed. With eager anticipation, I considered this an excellent first foray into Russian airliners.

Fortunately, one of the three flights the SSJ-100 operates on a regular basis into the United States is to Miami, my home airport (the others being Houston and San Antonio). With minimal muss or fuss, I could make a day trip out of it – flying from Miami to Cancun and back throwing in a little beach and exploration time to boot. And as a bonus, tick off another airline, the well regarded Mexican LCC Interjet.
Interjet is currently the sole Western carrier operating the SSJ-100, though Dublin-based CityJet is due to commence in 2016. Belgian carrier VLM cancelled their order recently however. I had heard many good things about Interjet being known flatteringly as the jetBlue of Mexico so I was eager to put all these confluence of contrails to the test.

RELATED: CityJet to Take Delivery of 15 Superjet SSJ100

RELATED: Sukhoi’s Superjet Searches for More Western Sales

RELATED: Interjet – A Brief History and Flight Review

A Long Way to Go From Russia to Mexico

Before we delve into the actual flight, a little refresher into the Interjet / SSJ back-story. The SSJ had a rather troubled development period and eventual Entry Into Service (EIS). Compounding this was skepticism of any Russian-built aircraft being truly ready to take on the “Best of the West”. Even with the backing of the Russian government, which considers it the most important civil aircraft program, the Superjet was one of only a few new civil non-amphibious jet airliner developed in the post-Soviet Russian era. The TU-204 and AN-148 were developed post-1991 but have never been taken or marketed seriously in the West. With the historically poor reputation of Russian built aircraft came enhanced scrutiny and hurdles to clear, particularly in perception.

Early on, through a combination of bad luck and bizarre circumstances, the SSJ program did itself no favors. Following the first flight of the prototype in May 2008, it would take nearly three years for the aircraft to enter commercial service. The flight test program and production challenges as has become the norm with clean sheet airliners (shades of the CSeries), resulted in delaying first deliveries from a way too optimistic late 2008 by nearly 3 years with the first Sukhoi SSJ entering service on April 21, 2011 between Moscow Sheremetyevo International Airport and Zvarnots International Airport for launch customer Armavia. The Armenian airline's discontent with its 2 SSJ's quickly mounted and by August 2012, the pair were returned to Superjet. The airline's rocky finances resulted in it ceasing operations in the following year – hardly an auspicious beginning with a prestigious operator.
The plot worsened when Aeroflot claimed its first six Superjet 100s were only operating 3.9 hours per day on average instead of the standard fleet utilization of 8 to 9 hours due to breakdowns, technical failures, and delayed parts deliveries. Aeroflot not only pursued Superjet for compensation but would later swap the first 10 of its SSJ fleet for upgraded models, beginning in 2014.
As if the first two customers failed to ignite any confidence, a swift succession of accidents contributed to further damage the aircraft’s reputation, even if not the fault of the plane itself. On May 9, 2012 an SSJ-100 on a demonstration flight with 37 passengers and 8 Russian crew members crashed after hitting a mountain south of Jakarta, Indonesia, killing everyone aboard. The accident report found that the aircraft’s collision avoidance system was functioning properly, but was ignored by the chief test pilot, who was at the controls at the moment of the crash.

Pilot error was again a major factor in an accident just over a year later when on July 21, 2013, an SSJ prototype landed gear-up at Keflavik International Airport, Iceland. During the testing of the automatic landing system, the landing gear did not deploy. Fortuitously, no one aboard was seriously injured and the aircraft was repaired and flew again by the end of December of that year.

*RELATED:* Sukhoi’s Superjet Searches for More Western Sales

**Enter Interjet**
In 2011, rapidly-growing Interjet then only six years old and exclusively an Airbus A320 operator, made history when it became the first western operator to place an order for the SSJ, or indeed any new Russian-built airliner. In a statement to AirwaysNews, “Interjet opted for Superjet 100 because it was the aircraft that was best suited to our business model as one of our objectives was to reinforce connectivity in medium-density routes.” No doubt, very favorable pricing and support played a significant role in compelling a frontline western carrier take such a bold risk. The eyes of the aviation world indeed would be fixed on Interjet and a smooth entry into service of the SSJ in a true make it or break it story. If the aircraft succeeded with Interjet then the SSJ had a fighting chance. But if the first two years of the Sukhoi’s teething pains rough service entry were repeated anew with Interjet then it would be DOA at least as far as western sales were concerned.

**RELATED:** [Interjet – A Brief History and Inflight Review](#)

Interjet, with a very high fleet utilization rate and excellent reputation had to be concerned behind all the festive atmosphere which accompanied the first delivery in **July 2013 at the Paris Air Show** and then the reveal to **employees and media at the airline's Toluca, Mexico base**. To its credit, Interjet didn't show any concern publicly as is often the case where disagreements between customers and manufacturers are played out in the press. In fact, in a vote of confidence the airline’s first SSJ was registered XA-JLG. The initials J.L.G. belonging to the CEO of the privately held company Jose Luis Garza Alvarez. XA-JLG, the 23rd Superjet off the line, first flew nearly a year before in September 2012.

![Jose Luis Garza (Left) and Nazario Cauncegia (Right) in the delivery ceremony of Interjet's First SSJ-100 at the 2013 Paris Air Show. (Photo Credits: Roberto Leiro)](image)
After two months of familiarization flights, it was crunch time as Interjet inaugurated operations of the SSJ on September 18, 2013 with two aircraft. XA-JLG, the aircraft I flew, took the honors of the first flight (3150) with a 7:37 am departure from Mexico City on an hour sortie to Torreon, Mexico. To the pleasant surprise of many and relief on the part of Superjet International, Interjet reported a resounding operational success with the SSJ.

A report documented by aviation consultancy AirlInsight.com on the first anniversary of the EIS was similarly glowing: “On September 18, 2013 the first SSJ100 entered into service with the Mexican airline. Up to the anniversary date, Interjet’s fleet logged over 12,000 flight hours and 11,400 cycles. The maximum utilization in one day was over 11 flight hours. Since EIS Interjet’s SSJ100 fleet confirmed outstanding results in terms of performance in the typical high-altitude environment of Mexico. According to the airline’s operational reliability report, the SSJ100 reports technical dispatch reliability at an average 99%. Over the year of operations, the SSJ100 fleet has not logged any cancellations due to technical reasons. The fleet time leader is the first delivered SSJ100 (MSN 95023), which logged more than 2400 FH and 2300 FC starting from the EIS in September 18, 2013.”

After much anticipation, Interjet quietly bought the SSJ to U.S. soil. On September 12, 2014 the LCC opened the Monterrey, Mexico to San Antonio, Texas, just the type of short-haul, pioneering mission the airplane was intended for.

Since then, Interjet has gone on to take delivery of 18 of its 30 aircraft on order with likely intentions to purchase more. According to an airline spokesperson, the airline is extremely pleased with the SSJ: “We have found it to have operational reliability. The plane’s operating efficiency has enabled us to open new routes, increase flight frequencies during the high season and optimize our network of routes and their costs during the low season.”
When asked about the passenger experienced and if any passengers even noticed they were flying on such a unique aircraft, Interjet responded “Our passengers have remarked that the aircraft's highlights are its cabin width, generous carry-on luggage compartments and entertainment system.”

When we spoke to flight SSJ fight crew, they remarked that the platform was even more user friendly and intuitive then fleet sister aircraft Airbus A320’s. The spacious cockpit, very responsive side-stick controllers with feedback, large screened avionics displays, agile performance, and stable flying characteristics especially during weather were cited as the positives. The only negative I was able to gather, but one which I echo, was the somewhat higher level of cabin noise over the Airbus A320 and other competitive aircraft.

As of December 31, 2015, Interjet Superjets are currently flying from Mexico City to Aguascalientes, Campeche, La Paz, León (in the Bajío region), Manzanillo, Mazatlán, Minatitlán, Palenque, Reynosa, San Luis Potosí, Torreón, Tuxtla Gutiérrez and Tampico. They are also operating from Toluca to Monterrey, Acapulco, Zihuatanejo and San José del Cabo. Internationally, they are flying from Cancún to Miami and Havana, from Monterrey to Havana, and Houston and San Antonio to Monterrey. Las Vegas is reportedly next to be added.

SuperJet Trip Report: Interjet Flight 4967 Miami to Cancun

With a light pre-Christmas workload back at the office on the spur of the moment, I decided to sample Interjet and the SSJ-100 myself. Fearing limited availability during the holiday season on the 1 MIA-CUN-MIA round-trip per day, I was pleasantly surprised to find plenty of availability. The website was user-friendly and simple to navigate so no problem there. I paid $454 including taxes with 7 days notice. This was a bit more expensive then the other player on the route, American Airlines. But, befitting “The jetBlue of Mexico”, Interjet includes amenities in the single, base fare regardless of status: 2 pieces of luggage weighing up to 55
pound apiece, 34” of legroom at every seat, and some other niceties we will mention later.

Of note, the airline’s MIA-CUN passenger mix is much more Mexican VFR (Visiting Friends and Relatives) or connecting international traffic from other carriers. The airline code-shares with American in some markets though not in this route, but is not currently a part of any alliance. Interjet is a small player at Miami having begun service in 2013 but the 5 daily flights, including Mexico City in direct competition with American and AeroMexico run at a high load factor with the service being a major factor.

I was not checking luggage but did wish to pre-board to photograph the cabin and then had prior arrangements to photograph the ramp as well. The mobile app and lack of kiosks were irrelevant to me as I had to present a passport anyway. I therefore arrived at the deserted check-in counter at 7:00am for my 8:15am departure. Was I late or had the flight been cancelled? Turns out most of the passengers had already checked in and were at the gate, as most checked luggage and this being an international flight were asked to arrive up to 2 hours early. Check-in was effortless, aided by reminder emails leading up to the day of departure reminding me of my itinerary. And surprise! A reminder that if I needed to change my flight, it would only cost $25 – talk about customer friendly!

I arrived at the gate at Concourse F, which instantly bought back nostalgia when this was the domain of Pan Am and then United's Latin American hub operations. After a quick photo session on the ramp and cabin, I participated in the very orderly boarding process. With a no over-selling policy, free checked luggage, and only 80 of the 93 seats occupied, the boarding process was smooth. Boarding was accomplished in 5 zones from front to back.

First impressions were very favorable. The Italian designed Pininfarina designed cabin oozed elegance with its Interjet by “Pininfarina branding”, grey leather seating, capacious overhead bins, soft lighting, wide cabin (the same 10 foot width of an MD-80 or Cseries), and tall 6 foot ceilings certainly set the stage for a nice, albeit short flight. If you blinked, you could be forgiven for thinking you were on a jetBlue aircraft though the 3-2 seating and drop down IFE's in lieu of setback LiveTV would be a gentle reminder that this wasn't a B6 flight.
Our two flight attendants provided gracious smiles and assistance to those needing help with securing their luggage. I settled into my padded, not slimline seat 1A on the bulkhead which has the same 34” legroom and 18.3” wide seat throughout. The aircraft can seat up to 108 passengers in a dense seat pitch of 30” configuration or 98 passengers in a more typical 32” cabin. Interjet, in its passenger friendly version opted to go with just 98 seats. One wonders if like jetBlue, if and when Interjet goes public, will they eventually mimic jetBlue and indeed the industry in offering a more stripped down fare with tighter seat pitch and less baggage allowance? I noticed the seats, arm rests, and cabin panels were a bit worn, surprising considering this aircraft – the first delivered to the airline – had only been in service for a little over 2 years. I didn't notice much in the way of grime and the plane was pretty clean, so one has to wonder if the materials are up to par?

With our full compliment of passengers on board, we pushed back 15 minutes ahead of schedule. The drop-down IFE screens displayed a well produced bi-lingual safety video, but then switched to the moving map display. I was a bit dismayed that Interjet’s well known cockpit camera wasn’t activated on this aircraft.
Four minutes ahead of schedule, we were lined up on MIA's runway 8L and ready to roll. As the throttles spooled up the PowerJet SaM 146's somewhere near their maximum 16,000 pound take-off thrust, came a sudden reminder that this was a Russian aircraft – The SSJ's noise level was noticeably more noisy than other current generation aircraft. As an AvGeek, I found this cacophony seductive. This impression of the take-off roll volume would be only somewhat attenuated in the cruise. In a brief 23 seconds, we were airborne and shorty thereafter beginning a gradual turn to the Southeast towards the Florida Keys. 5 minutes into the climb, the seatbelt sign was extinguished. And by 23 minutes we had reached our cruising altitude of 34,000 feet at a speed of 510mph / 443 kts.

Before the service began, this gave me a chance to check-out the lavatories. Why the lavs? Both the forward and aft lavs on the SSJ are cavernous, especially for an aircraft of its size. The aft lav boasts a big pink placard indicating its Women's Only "Exclusivo Mujeres" which is as far as I know, unique to Interjet. I suppose this is great if you're a woman, but men have to walk all the way up to the front of the cabin should they wish to use the facilities, which showed its challenges during the service and longer lines forming at the front of the cabin. I applaud the innovation and marketing creativity, but am not sure this is as passenger friendly in practice as it sounds.

Inflight entertainment is an areas where Interjet fell short of expectations – even on a short flight. The drop down screens display rather innocuous programming punctuated by the occasional moving map. On these flights, the programming was a Mexican version of a show called “Just for Laughs” which didn’t really require any understanding of Spanish. What was annoying was that audio for the show was pumped obtrusively through the entire cabin – there are no headphone jacks on the SSJ so the only way to escape it was to wear your own. The inflight magazine was entirely in Spanish, but the quality of content, photography, and paper stock was very premium. Still, the glorious scenery of the Florida Keys, Straits of Florida, Cuba, and the Yucatan Peninsula through the amply sized windows of the SSJ more then satisfied.
An abbreviated, but welcome catering service arrived 40 minutes into the flight. With less than 90 minutes, the granola bars or potato chips were appreciated. But what really surprised is free alcohol even on morning flights. For those so inclined, a full liquor and beer bar service sans wine was offered at no charge. The cabin crew were generous – handing over full bottles of soft drinks without having to ask.

After an altogether too short 30 minutes at cruise, we began our descent into Cancun which afforded us a low altitude tour of the City, surrounding jungle, spectacular coral waters, and the beautiful Isle of Mujeres. We touched down at 9:32am local time, after a smooth uneventful 1 hour and 19 minutes in the air.

Just after deplaning via airstrips at Cancun’s Terminal 2, my iPhone alert buzzed indicating a newly received email. The first e-mail I received? Not surprisingly, a thank you note from Interjet and a request for a short survey. Now that’s a first – that fast.
In summary, Interjet provides an upgraded single-class economy service not that far removed in concept from jetBlue of the last decade. Missing are the LiveTV, in-flight connectivity, a broader catering offering, and a premium Mint Cabin. In a number of subtle features, Interjet reveals surprises and amenities that its inspiring carrier does not offer. The SSJ-100 platform itself, apart from being a bit loud, was very smooth felt similar to an Embraer E-Jet but with design touches that surprised and delighted. None of the quirkiness associated with classic or even more modern Russian aircraft was present.

Both Interjet and the Superjet deserve high marks. Only 10 years old, Interjet has become a major player in Mexico and Central America with distinguishing service and operational service. The plucky Mexican airline and well conceived Russian aircraft seem to have entered into a very positive marriage. As the SSJ approaches its 100th delivery, Interjet’s indisputable success with the Superjet could spur on more orders from the west and the east as well. The path won’t be easy according to industry analyst Robert W. Mann, Jr “Given the small narrowbody competition and their global support structure, any new program will find it difficult to compete, whether that is the SSJ, MRJ, even the Series.” Nevertheless, competitors in the crowded 90-110 seat market segment should not write-off this unlikely but potent Russian-Italian competitor.

As for me, my true Russian flying experience will just have to wait until that trip to the DPRK, that is assuming things calm down on the Korean Peninsula.

Disclosure: The author paid for his own trip, but as always the opinions are the author’s alone.

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