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HondaJet

The carmaker goes airborne with a fast, spacious light jet.



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* HondaJet *

WITH ITS LONG, narrow nose and two jet engines perched on pylons above its wings, the HondaJet looks like no other aircraft. And as the first airplane ever built by car and motorcycle maker Honda, it has generated keen interest. While novel, however, the plane is much more than a novelty. With its combination of speed, roominess, and fuel efficiency, the HondaJet presents an attractive alternative to other light and very light jets that will reach customers over the next couple of years.

In July 2006, at the Experimental Aircraft Association's AirVenture show in Oshkosh, Wis., Honda announced it was establishing Honda Aircraft Co., which would build the HondaJet. Prior to that announcement, the company had insisted the aircraft was purely a research project. By February of this year, it had received close to 200 orders for the \$3.65 million jet and was

building a plant in North Carolina.

Honda expects to produce about 70 planes a year beginning in 2010, and the backlog already extends to 2012. Michimasa Fujino, Honda Aircraft Co.'s CEO, says that if the waiting list becomes too long, Honda may suspend sales for a while. "If you want to buy one," he advises, "don't wait."

The jet's launch was deeply satisfying for Fujino, as he is also the plane's chief designer. His most radical idea was to place the engines atop the wings, a configuration skeptics said could never work. But in the late 1990s, Fujino identified a "sweet spot" on the wings where airflow became optimal; tests in wind tunnels supported his theory. Honda submitted a patent application for the engine configuration in 1999, and a prototype of the aircraft flew in December 2003, on the 100th anniversary of the Wright brothers' first flight at Kitty Hawk.

The unique engine positioning allowed Fujino to add more interior space to the cabin, which has just under 5 feet of standing room, without increasing the size of the plane or compromising its speed (as fast as 485 mph at 30,000 feet). To maximize the jet's aerodynamic efficiency, Honda is building the fuselages with the same composite materials it uses for its racecars. The company also worked with General Electric to develop new turbine engines. Fujino says the design is 30 percent to 35 percent more fuel-efficient than comparable light jets; it can fly about 1,610 miles nonstop and reach an altitude of 43,000 feet. He is also proud of the five-passenger jet's comfort level, noting that the lavatory is "very private" and the luggage space plentiful. —MARY GRADY

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