



Advantage Avanti

The revived Piaggio turboprop has a head start on the forthcoming light jets.

PIAGGIO AERO INDUSTRIES' P180 AVANTI was first certified in 1990, but as the company struggled financially during the ensuing decade, the plane failed to gain favor among business fliers. Piaggio ultimately declared bankruptcy in 1998, but that same year, a consortium of investors, including the Ferrari and Di Mase families, purchased the Italian company and jump-started its revival. In the past 18 months, Piaggio has received 28 orders—at \$5.7 million each—from U.S. customers for the seven-passenger, 453 mph aircraft. The figure is far greater than the handful of planes that trickled off Piaggio's production line in its darker years.

However, just as Piaggio is beginning to enjoy some prosperity, it faces a significant salvo from the companies producing the next generation of light jets. Adam Aircraft, Avocet Aircraft, Cessna, Diamond Aircraft, Eclipse Aviation, and Safire Aircraft are among the manufacturers poised to release aircraft—machines with prices several million dollars less than the Avanti's—that could offer alternatives to the Italian turboprop. Although the FAA has yet to certify any of the jets, customers have already placed several thousand orders—more than 2,000 just in Eclipse's case—for the aircraft.

The Piaggio P180 Avanti's 453 mph speed and dynamic design are two reasons why Ferrari's Formula One team owns the sleek turboprop.



Jim Holcombe, Piaggio America's executive vice president of sales and marketing, acknowledges the emergence of the light jets, but he sees more differences than similarities between them and the Avanti. "Certainly, there's going to be a big market for entry-level jets," he says. "Generally speaking, our aircraft offers a much larger cabin. If you're an owner/operator, and you routinely fly around with perhaps one other person, then these jets might be worth considering. Our aircraft has a midsize cabin at a price well below a Hawker, and yet we have performance that is equal to that of the light jets, and the operating costs are much lower."

In addition to its cabin size and operating costs, the Avanti's appearance distinguishes it from the light jets. It features two rear-facing propellers, which are driven by Pratt & Whitney PT6A-66 engines, and a curvaceous fuselage that make it one of the most striking shapes in the air. However, its dolphinlike silhouette is not just for show; the aircraft's curves enable the plane to fly nearly 25 percent faster than the Beech King Air B200, one of its main rivals. The location of the propellers reduces cabin

noise; under full power at takeoff, it is possible to carry on a conversation without raising your voice. The cabin, which, as Holcombe notes, is larger than the interiors of the forthcoming light jets, offers nearly 6 feet of headroom and enough space for seven seats and a bathroom.

At least one client believes that the Avanti also compares well with the current generation of light jets, which are more expensive than upcoming aircraft such as the Eclipse 500. Euroskylink, a British company that operates the aircraft for charter and medical services, has been impressed enough with the Avanti to order three additional planes. Earlier this year, chief pilot Shaun Harborne flew two passengers aboard the plane from London to Pisa, Italy. "We took off a few minutes ahead of a Learjet 60," he recalls. "After a two-hour flight over the Alps, we arrived immediately behind it in Italy. Over a typical mission, we were only six to eight minutes slower than a plane that costs three times as much to buy and substantially more to fly." —MATTHEW STIBBE

Piaggio America, 561.253.0104, www.piaggioamerica.com

The spacious interior of the Avanti trumps the cabins of the next generation of light jets.