

It's strictly business at Al Bateen

By Keith Mwanalushi.

The rapidly expanding business aviation scene in the United Arab Emirates is running parallel with the planned evolution of Abu Dhabi into a vibrant international business centre.

As the demand grows for private charter flights, the UAE authorities have established a gateway dedicated solely to exclusive private business travel.

Al Bateen Executive Airport is the first of its kind in the Middle East and North Africa.

The airport has a historical significance. It was built in the 1960s and was the first airport in the Emirates situated in the Al Bateen district of Abu Dhabi. By 1970 Al Bateen was the sole international airport serving the UAE capital.

With the opening of Abu Dhabi International Airport in 1982, Al Bateen was then transformed into a military airbase. In 2008 the ownership and management of the airbase was transferred to the Abu Dhabi Airports Company (ADAC), which restored the facility into a civilian airport with a dedicated focus on private aviation.

"The requirements for an airport operator to handle civilian aircraft movements are particularly onerous," said vice president of Al Bateen Executive Airport, Mohammed Al Bulooki. "Securing civilian certification in 2009 was a major accomplishment and a significant milestone in the airport's development. The needs and expectations of multiple stakeholders must be balanced and ADAC is proud of the mutually warm and supportive relationship that it has enjoyed with the military during this transformational period."

The UAE is central to the Middle East business aviation industry. ADAC indicates that there were about 530 business jets operating in the Middle East

in 2009 and this figure is expected to rise to almost 1,200 aircraft by 2018, of which 38 per cent are based in the UAE. Global research and consulting firm Frost & Sullivan believes the region currently accounts for approximately six per cent of the global business jets market.

From the onset, it was paramount that the airport delivers the convenience and flexibility that operators would not easily achieve from the larger hubs. Security clearances are quick and there is a total lack of queues and waiting time. The added appeal of Al Bateen is its location – it is a mere 10 minute drive from the city centre, allowing quick access to the core business district for time-conscious business travellers. Other noteworthy locations, such as the Al Bateen Wharf redevelopment, are even closer.

Swift ramp operations and efficient turnaround times are key to the airport operation. Passengers have only a two-minute taxi time after landing and cars are permitted to pick up from airside. The runway is 3,200 meters long and can accommodate aircraft up to the Boeing Business Jet or 787-800 sizes.

The immigration and clearance procedure is also very efficient but ADAC is in the process of making arrangements to have this formality completed at the aircraft to allow for even faster processing.

The airport terminals are furnished with all the amenities and technologies that are expected by VIP and VVIP users. ADAC offers its own newly refurbished lounges; alternatively passengers have the option to use other lounges that are owned by the various private jet operators.

Since the airport returned to civilian use, there has been a steady increase



in capacity. During the first quarter of 2010 ADAC reported a 30 per cent increase in aircraft movements compared to the previous year. The airport owners have indicated that there is still a high level of interest in its facilities and this trend reflects in the latest figures.

Director of marketing communications, Mohammed Al Bulooki, said: "The airport has demonstrated exceptional growth for the first half of 2010 generating 3,973 commercial traffic movements, which is 34.3 per cent ahead of last year. There has been excellent performance from all the base operators and we have managed to attract more than 100 per cent more itinerant airlines than the previous year."

More than \$50 million of capital expenditure was allocated for various infrastructure works between 2008 and 2010. A number of upgrades and development works are currently under way in order to meet the anticipated demand from the private and business jet market.

"As part of ADAC's strategic expansion, a multi-million dollar re-development is currently under way, which will cover all aspects of operation, including upgrade of the airfield, hangar and aviation support facilities," said Al Bulooki.

He also emphasised the importance of the Etihad Airways Formula 1 Grand Prix in November – now in its second year. Phase one of the master plan was tailored to meet the necessary developments needed to accommodate the second Formula 1 race. "The inaugural race in 2009 saw motorsport enthusiasts from all over the world descend on Abu Dhabi, driving an 18 per cent increase in aircraft movements at both Abu Dhabi and Al Bateen airport," he said. The construction of a hotel and expansion of the parking and retail facilities is also part of the master plan.

There is a growing list of private jet operators based at Al Bateen, while others use the airport from time to time.

One of the prime tenants is Falcon Aviation Services (FAS), an executive charter and aircraft management company. FAS has established its own hangar facilities (the others are owned by the airport) and it provides private charters, offshore as well as a full FBO range.

FAS operates from a state-of-the-art terminal and business centre and the

company offers tailored solutions for VIP, VVIP, diplomatic and large aircraft operations. The scope of FBO services also includes VIP security services, over-flight and landing clearances, limousine transfers and hotel accommodation.

In early 2010, ADAC signed a landmark deal with Al Jaber Aviation (AJA), making it the most prominent tenancy deal at the airport. AJA will provide its VIP aviation charter services from Al Bateen for a minimum of ten years.

Dr Mark Pierotti, chief operating officer for AJA said: "Basing AJA at Al Bateen has helped us continue to deliver world-class services to our elite guests with fast-on-fast-off processing; an advantage that we could not obtain in other international or larger airports in the region."

Pierotti pointed out another advantage presented by using this niche market airport. "It combines a strategic location with fully-equipped operational, administrative and maintenance facilities managed by ADAC. This is beneficial as we plan to further build our aircraft fleet over the coming years."

Abu Dhabi-based AJA is the aviation arm of the Al Jaber Group that employs more than 60,000 people and is the nation's largest employer. In 2008, AJA announced a \$1.2 billion order for up to 21 new aircraft. Once deliveries are complete, the fleet will include two A319 Corporate Jets, four A318 Elite, Five Embraer Lineage 1000 and two Legacy 600s.

Other tenants at the facility include Prestige Jet, Royal Helite Helicopters and Luxury Air Jet.

A number of other companies only use the airport in line with the specific requirements of their clientele. Nick Maynard, a spokesman from Royal Jet, said despite being based at Abu Dhabi International, his company welcomed the decision to reinforce the UAE's dominant position as a regional powerhouse in business aviation by investing in a facility such as Al Bateen. Royal Jet is now working with the relevant authorities to assess its operational requirements for Al Bateen.

Increased business activity will continue to push demand for business aviation in the region, according to the Empire Aviation Group (EAG). It, too, occasionally drops in at the airport.

The company indicates that, as business activity increases, the





international airports will get busier. It will then become a natural choice for business operators to have a presence at Bateen Executive – including Empire Aviation.

The company intends to operate a base for both its seaplane and charter business there. EAG also indicated the up-swing trend in the private charter business in the latter half of 2010.

In the months since May, the company has seen about a 40 per cent increase in monthly charters, compared to the low point of 2009.

From 2011, XJet plans to break ground by introducing its award winning seven-star service and “aviation campus” concept to Al Bateen. The US company will establish its facilities with the direction of its partner and investor Ali Al Naqbi – founding chairman of the Middle East Business Aviation Association.

XJet president Josh Stewart is keen to expand the XJet experience and bring a new approach to FBO services. “The traditional FBOs gain the majority of their revenues from fuel and handling fees, and many others have other core competencies that are their main focus – charter, aircraft sales, MRO and often the FBO is an extension of this business,” he said.

“XJet was built from the ground up for the private jet owner and user. Because XJet makes a profit through a membership fee, it can offer very competitive rates on fuelling and handling for the transient traffic.”

Stewart said that the club component that has proved popular at its flagship site in Denver is the cornerstone of the business. “The club component of the XJet aviation campus provides us with an advantage in delivering club-like services and facilities to visiting VVIPs. The campus will include an exclusive members-only clubhouse, as well as equally impressive facilities for transient customers, and we are looking forward to providing our unique and proven seven-star service in the very near future in the UAE. This is a gem of an airport and there are tremendous opportunities for XJet here.”

Bayanat Airports Engineering and Supplies (BAES) was selected as the airport systems integrator and began work in 2008. Alain Bourjeily, general manager at BAES, outlined some of the work that has been carried out. “We have successfully deployed a digital recorder and communications systems at Al Bateen Executive Airport; these include the legal recorder for audio and radar data; along with the fibre and copper backbone for the navigational aids systems and the meteorological systems.”

Further to successfully completing those systems, BAES was awarded an

additional contract to design, supply and install the instrument landing system (ILS) itself. “The installed system is the Northrop Grumman/Park Air Systems Normac 7000B - CAT 1 – ILS,” said Bourjeily. “We recently conducted the flight check and the system was commissioned without any restriction.”

Bourjeily explained what the checks entail. “Before using an ILS system, a test is required for calibration in order to declare it operational. The testing is achieved using a special aircraft, which performs a certain number of measurements and recommends some calibrations. Once all readings and calibrations are within ICAO regulation tolerance, the system is declared operational; this could be either unrestricted, if it fully complies with all regulations, or restricted, meaning it is usable but with certain criteria.”

The deployment of the ILS at Al Bateen will allow a larger number of airlines and carriers to use the airport.

The contract also included the requirement for the design and supply of distance measuring equipment (DME). The DME is an integral part of the ILS. It provides more accurate and continuous monitoring of correct progress on the ILS glide slope to the pilot, and does not require an installation outside the airport boundary.

Despite the successful integration of these technologies, Bourjeily stressed that the challenge was the design, which took a considerable amount of time due to the airport’s close proximity to the city and the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque.

“We were happy that the supervision committee for the expansion of the Abu Dhabi International Airport (SCADIA) and ADAC chose us for this prestigious project,” said Bourjeily. “This further strengthens our presence in this territory as we expand our works into other regional airports, which ADAC has been appointed to manage. The Al Bateen project is of very high importance to us as we were able to prove our added values as airport system integrator for the various technology fields.”

In March 2011, ADAC will be the hosting the Al Bateen Private Aviation Symposium looking at the development of business aviation in the Middle East. Al Bateen Executive Airport will be the hosting venue, bringing together all the key elements and stakeholders in private aviation.

Al Bulooki concluded: “Today’s cost of doing business in the region is at a level where it is comfortable for people to invest and grow. The airport works as a true partner to its customers and our movements are on the up, so ADAC is confident that the business will continue to flourish.”