



# Formula For A Flight

## Challenger 300: Vienna–Moscow

TEXT > Alexander FEDOROV  
PHOTO > Dmitry BARINOV

**FORMULA 1** rules the roost in the automobile world. Its designers and engineers constantly create and refine technical innovations for their racing cars.

The Challenger 300 business jet is one of the leaders in the mid-size class. In a way it is a Formula 1 car of the business aviation world. The new baby of Bombardier gained popularity right after its creation. Those wanting to buy the aircraft have to wait in line for at least four years and pay \$24 million. Despite these obstacles, as of June 31 2007, 107 Challenger 300s have been sold. One of them, with the serial number “4”, belongs to Amira Air. Our *Jet* correspondents seized an opportunity to take a flight on one from Vienna to Moscow.

### Dinner Dilemma

Just to be safe, we took a low-cost flight to Vienna. We made the decision to go to Austria just a couple of

hours prior to flying. In the morning we were informed that the following day a Challenger will be flying us to Russia. After dinner we were already looking for an appropriate flight from Moscow’s Domodedovo airport. The only option available was Fly Niki airline, with its suspiciously cheap 160 Euro tickets. Our skepticism towards the price-equals-quality rule fell away when we got on board a brand new Airbus 320. During the flight we were catered for by attentive stewardesses. The three hours of flight in comfortable armchairs smelling of fresh leather passed quickly. In the evening we sat down with Amira Air COO/Sales&Marketing Director Laura Vargha to discuss what café to dine in. As we shall see, our flight with Fly Niki was far from conventional...

### Flying Niki

Amira Air’s fleet is comprised of two Challenger 300s, one Chal-

lenger 604 and one Global Express. All of them are used as commercial jets. Yet, one of the Challenger 300s is private. In the business aviation world it is usually bad form to name the owner of this or that plane. In our case there is no sense in hiding the name of this particular owner. He is already well known not only in Austria but

also beyond its borders: Niki Lauda, the former Formula 1 driver, successful businessman and owner of the Fly Niki airline.

Like the mythical Phoenix, Niki Lauda both metaphorically and physically arose from the ashes a number of times in his life. At the peak of his career as a Formula 1 champion, he ended up in a disas-

trous accident. His Ferrari 312/T2 crashed into another car at an enormous speed. Niki was saved miraculously, but endless plastic surgery operations couldn’t save his hair, ears, eyebrows and eyelashes. Nevertheless, six weeks later Lauda was in his car and won the world championship again! He left sports and founded his own airline





Lauda Air in 1976. His company became the only competitor to Austrian Airlines. When the Americans imposed an economic embargo on Cuba, and only such unpatriotic individuals like Jack Nicholson continued to smoke Cohiba cigars, Niki Lauda organized a cigar trip to Havana, with most of the passengers his friends. In 1980 he brought an Austrian horse and its jockey to the Olympic Games in Moscow, even though Austria officially boycotted the 1980 Olympics.

On May 26 1991, a Lauda Air airliner crashed over Thailand. All 223 passengers were killed. Lauda's business took it hard. It was impossible to do anything for the dead but Lauda managed to defend the reputation of his business, as it turned out that the reason for the plane crash was due to faulty aircraft construction rather than airliner misconduct.

Lauda held his patience for about five years, only to return to Formula 1 in 1982. He drove for McLaren and became the world champion for the third time. Rumours abound ed that Lauda just needed money at that time. However, Ferrari, McLaren and Jaguar gladly sought his help afterwards. The money he made was enough to set up another company — Fly Niki.

“This morning I noticed a butterfly symbol blinking in my car”, — says Laura Vargha with a rather unique and unexpected spontaneity. “I called Mr. Lauda and he said that it was nothing serious. All I needed to do was give the engine a litre of oil. He even advised me which brand to use...”

Unfortunately we didn't manage to chat with Niki Lauda. Friendship is free. Interviews cost money, and Lauda's tariffs aren't far off from his F1 earnings: even

paying for advertising on his trademark red cap costs millions.

### Putin Was Here

Amira Air office is located in the General Aviation Terminal. It reminded me of a kindergarten. The tiny car park, the small cozy café on the first floor, the office buildings with views of green Austrian fields all looked so romantic and peaceful until I noticed that the windows looking out into the air field are made from bulletproof glass. Cameras are stuck everywhere, the building is guarded by a brand-new alarm system and a policeman armed with a machine-gun nonchalantly strolls nearby. A week before our arrival, Vladimir Putin was here in this very terminal on this very airfield. This main port of Austrian business aviation is also used to host high-ranking officials from abroad.

A preflight check of our documents and so forth took some 15 seconds at most. A friendly policeman welcomed us with a smile as he stamped our passports. A comfortable Volkswagen Multivan took us to the steps of the aircraft.

### Hotel Papa Kilo

Our plane had the HPK registration on its fuselage. In aviation speak it is pronounced “hotel papa kilo”. The cabin of the Challenger 300 looks like a hotel suite. The cabin's height is almost 1.85 meters. There are no “trenches” in the





floor no there are central “passages” in the ceiling instead, which is a premium characteristic for a jet of this class. Secondly, the cabin layout includes four armchairs and elegant Venetian blinds on the windows. The elbow rests are warm, the armchair leather is soft, the carpet is fleecy and wall panels are pleasant to the touch.

Our flight attendant Johanna immediately offers us drinks when we get on board. 7 AM is not a good time for alcohol, so we order coffee. It is surprisingly strong thanks to its Austrian origins. It seems superb coffee is part of Amira Air’s corporate policy.

As this thought came into my head our plane started moving. Johanna had mysteriously disappeared. “Where is she? Surely she’s not in the lavatory”. Indeed she was — the cabin of the Challenger 300 doesn’t have a seat for a flight attendant. Unfortunately the stewardess has to sit on the soft lid of the lavatory pan as it is equipped with safety belts. In the advertising pamphlets this place is delicately referred to as “additional seating”. Being gentlemen we simply couldn’t stand this indignity and invited Johanna to take up an empty seat in the cabin.

The lovely and communicative girl told us that two years ago she worked in the VIP accommodation department of one of the prestigious German hotels. Then she accepted an offer to become a business jet flight attendant.

“We studied in the US and this job seemed very fascinating for me from the very first day. When you are 25 you want to see the world and learn more about other countries”, — says Johanna. I like communicating with people so I like my job in Amira Air very much”.

A rapid ascension interrupts our conversation for a few moments. It becomes a bit noisy in the cabin and we have to raise our voices. A modification of the Challenger 300 exists that allows you to whisper to your neighbour, but right now we are flying on the basic model.

After leveling out our plane starts flying at cruising speed. I ask Johanna for permission to go into the cockpit. “No problem”, she says smiling as usual. I leave my seat and, passing a small galley, head to greet pilots.

Our captain Clemens Rothmann used to work for Swissair. He first piloted A319s and Hawkers. The autopilot is on, the co-pilot keeps his eye on the instruments while





the captain tells me his story. He is not enthusiastic about his work in regular airlines. “It was like driving a tram. Passengers need it but after a couple of years you get bored of it. It’s really tiresome to move on the same tracks”. He gets more vivid when talking about business aviation and about the Challenger 300 in particular. “I realize that this doesn’t sound very earnest when the captain is talking, but this really is an awesome plane! It was designed for pilots, it is comfortable for the crew, and above all it is reliable and robust. Believe me; I’ve got enough experience to compare it with other models”.

#### From Coast to Coast

The Challenger 300 has been nicknamed a “coast-to-coast plane”. This means that if the jet takes off somewhere in New York it can easi-

ly cover the distance to Los Angeles. On the European scale it is equal to having breakfast in Paris and dining in Dubai, and then reminisce about it over coffee somewhere in Deli in the evening the next day. The 300 has a range of 5,741 kilometers and a maximum speed of 850 km/h.

As for the lavatory it is more a restroom, in the American sense of the word. The lavatory is equipped with a small table, a basin and a mirror. On top of this there are any number of razors, brushes, shampoos, creams, lotions, eau-de-Colognes and other perfumes. The toilet itself is similar to an additional seat. The lavatory is isolated from the rest of the cabin by a wooden partition and a lock-up door. Also in the rear of the cabin is a spacious baggage compartment.

Our studies of the satellite phone, video-system and CD-play-

er were interrupted by breakfast. It included an omelete, hot buns, cheeses and sausages — just what you need in the morning.

For once we broke our tradition of sleeping on board a jet. We merely folded the arm-chairs into sleeping places. It works well. Of course, it is not a king-size bed but if you’re on your own then it is rather spacious and there are specially designed mattresses. So it’s easy to get a good night’s sleep.

Low clouds, strong cross winds and turbulence met us in Moscow. We touched down on Moscow’s Vnukovo runway and taxied to the terminal. The first planes to meet us there were this Challenger 300’s two “brothers”. We had flown home in the latest Muscovite fashion. **7**

*Amira Air provided the plane for the flight*

