Fly Virtual

“Any Aircraft, Any Airline, Any Route, Any Time... No B.S.”

After the excitement of last issue’s MEBAR rally, I’ve once again been trawling the internet in search of a virtual airline to pique my interest. Regular readers will know I love the odd and different, the VA that do things differently. If it’s quirky, I love it. Well, this issue, I think I’ve found my new favourite and it was sold to me with an awesome tagline: Introducing Fly Virtual: “Any Aircraft, Any Airline, Any Route, Any Time... No BS!” Now who could argue with that?

Humble beginnings

Like many of the VAs I’ve written about, Fly Virtual’s management is made up of people from other VAs. With them they’ve brought the good and left the bad. From there as COO (Chief Operating Officer) Randy Detnner described it: “We put those lessons into the VA-making machine, turned the crank and poof! Here we are.” It’s certainly a good start. Randy and the rest of the crew have a good base to start from: “None of us forget where we came from in this hobby. We all remember that struggle to learn all it takes to get the best possible simulation with what you have at hand. With that we make sure to keep in mind that we are here for the pilots...all of them.”

I’m starting to really like these guys. The VA prides itself on flexibility. There’s no testing or hours requirement. You pick the aircraft you want to fly, pick the route and you’re off.

Anything goes?

So from the tagline, you’d imagine that Fly Virtual operates “fast and loose” when it comes to rules. As always things are a little more complicated than that. Let’s start by looking at airlines. While most VAs operate a single brand, Fly Virtual thinks bigger. If it flies in the real world, it flies with Fly Virtual. Just checking at the ‘Live Flight details’ section of the Fly Virtual website I can see flights from Air Canada, Silkair, Singapore Airlines, Citjet, Eva Air and more. Not content with that, there are also flights from Fly Virtual’s own-brand VA as well. I could fill this article just with the range of airlines available. There’s plenty of choice, that’s for sure. It’s not just airliners either; there are plenty of GA and military aircraft in the mix as well. All in all, Fly Virtual operates 252 different airlines and 204 different aircraft. That’s gobsmackingly massive in anyone’s book; and it’s growing.

A pilot’s life for me

When you join, you’re assigned a hub. For most VAs, the hub is home to all pilots in that region and pilots generally operate out of there as a home airport; think Delta and Atlanta International. With Fly Virtual, the hub works a little differently. Pilots get to choose a hub but they’re not tied to it. Randy tells me some pilots haven’t been back to their home hub in years. Currently the hubs are scattered throughout the world from Los Angeles, New York, Heathrow, Dubai, Hong Kong, Sydney and more. At the moment the team is building up its newest hub in South America, which involves collating new airlines and new routes. Hubs are very spontaneous and if members want a new hub somewhere, the management team make it happen. The same goes for new aircraft. Randy jokes that if you could get the submarine in Prepar3D v4 to fly and a member requested it, they’d probably start up a Fly Virtual.

Joining, you get to select your preferred airline and hub, and your username will be based around that call sign. The pilot roster reads like the arrivals board at an airport because of it. If you don’t like it though, you can change it. The same goes for your hub. Just let the management know and you can swap from Frankfurt to Dubai with ease. New pilots can also transfer up to 125 hours from other VAs, which is a nice, generous touch.

Community

Every VA is the culmination of its community and Fly Virtual’s community is incredibly strong.
Every hub has dozens of pilots and at any given time, there are more than a dozen flights active. That’s pretty sweet by itself but there’s always more to life than flying the schedule. Charters are always available for members who want to get away from it all. Here, it’s a fantastic pick and mix of routes and aircraft types. Kingairs and Caravans join alongside Tristars and 737-800ERs. There’s even a cracking little 83nm route that features a PZL-104 Wilga. I don’t even know what that is, but I want one! It’s an Ultra light apparently.

The charters can be arranged on the fly via SmartCARs 2. That’s a pretty neat option.

If charters aren’t your thing, then maybe a challenge would be better. There are at least two tours in place at any time. Right now, there’s a brilliant tour that follows the old Air Mail route in the US circa 1924. The tours run eastbound and westbound and are flown in a Tiger Moth. I’m so in love with that idea I may fly the routes myself. I’m not alone in this. More than 80 pilots are signed up and flying these tours as I type. Last year, Asia got its own tours. The management certainly is in tune with what its membership wants.

To that end, if a member finds a flight that really speaks to them which isn’t in the schedule, they can suggest it be added. All they need do is provide a flight plan or flight tracker trace. If it’s a real route, the management will add it to the schedule database, usually within six hours. Now that’s responsive.

If all that doesn’t have you beating a path to Fly Virtual’s door, perhaps I should mention the contests. Prizes include software, scenery and aircraft or even a gift certificate. All standard stuff. How do you win? Now that’s the interesting part. Introducing the “Poker Run Tour”. This intriguing competition runs like this. Obviously it involves a casino or rather a casino city, such as Vegas. A designated staff member draws a card for each leg a pilot flies. At the end of the flight, the top three poker hands win a prize. It sounds fun, how about a “landing rate tour”? To keep things fair, a random number is chosen before the tour. Once everyone has finished, the pilot whose landing rate is closest on either a designated leg or as an average to the random number wins. “I guess you could say that we’ve found ways to keep our give-a-ways fair as can be,” says Randy.

Away from the virtual world and the sound of the WA’s own TeamSpeak server, at least once a year members are invited to a real world meet-up. They usually try to pick a city where at least one member lives and organise a meet-up. There they find lots of aviation things to do.

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whether it’s a bit of spotting at the local airport, visiting museums or an aircraft boneyard. “This fosters a feeling of true community and allows members to get that person-to-person time that forms a true friendship and camaraderie,” Randy tells me. This year the meet-up was at Bradley International Airport and FlightSimCom.

When Randy talks of ‘lifetime friendships’ he’s not kidding. Occasionally, a meet-up will be under sadder circumstances. Members fall ill. One such member was TW Hanson. Diagnosed with cancer and knowing time was short, three members made a special trip to visit their friend and his family, who they knew as well as their own. Two weeks later, two members returned for TW Hanson’s funeral. “TW was a good person, pilot and a good friend,” said Randy. As a tribute, the VA has created the Silent Wings hub in his memory. Here departed members can be remembered.

Fly Virtual is one of the neatest VAs I’ve come across and possibly the most community-oriented. From a TeamSpeak server that provides pilots with all the advice they need, to an active forum and a fantastic management team which is active daily, Fly Virtual is something special. The huge choice of airlines and aircraft is mind-boggling. The added fun of the tours and competitions keeps life from getting boring. Support for multiple sims is assured with SmartCAPS 2 flight recording, which is a fantastic touch. However, it’s that community that really makes this airline something to cherish. Any place that lifetime friendships can grow is a good thing and Fly Virtual is just such an environment.

“All we ask is that they [members] show reasonable armchairmanship. We help pilots to succeed, not merely point out their failures, while they truly fly anything they want. We have also thrown the trivial little rule book out the window. Those points together make up the ...no BS. After all, who would we be asking a real-life retired 737 captain to build hours and pass tests to fly a 737 in the sim?” Randy tells me. It’s hard to disagree with him really.

By Jessica Bannister-Pearce

**Information**

For more information visit www.flyvirtual.net

Special thanks to Randy Detmer and the Fly Virtual Team for their help. If you have a VA which you want to be featured in PC Pilot, email me at jessica@pcpilot.net.