



TINY AIRLINE WITH TINY PLANES HAS BIG AMBITIONS

News / Business aviation



Because not every **airline** can fly everywhere, and not every city can attract a major airline, there remains a gap in commercial airline service. One Part 135 operator, Boutique Air, is gearing up to further expand its eight-passenger Pilatus PC-12 operations under the FAA's Essential Air Service (EAS) program.

The airline was founded in 2007 by CEO Shawn Simpson, who had come from Google after building a large-scale computing infrastructure. Simpson is a graduate of the University of California at Santa Cruz, with degrees in Biology and Environmental Studies. The original mission of his airline was to perform fire surveillance for the US Forestry Service and Bureau of Land Management. In 2011 Boutique Air began offering chartered flights using PC-12 turboprops, while earning an Aviation Research Group/US Gold safety rating and recognition as a [Wyvern Aviation Safety Intelligence](#) Registered Operator. The carrier's safety record remains flawless, says spokeswoman Danielle Hake.

Because Boutique Air flies under the EAS program, it has an interesting network — if you can call it a network. Boutique Air does not have a main hub, but rather several mini hubs. Its first scheduled commuter service began in January 2014 between Hawthorne Municipal Airport (near Los Angeles) and Las Vegas McCarran. But its EAS flying really began in July of that year, when the carrier took over a route from Clovis, New Mexico to Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW) that had been vacated by Great Lakes Airways. On 15 January 2015, Boutique Air launched flights from Silver City, New Mexico to Albuquerque. Service was initiated from Denver International Airport on 1 July

to Alliance, Nebraska and expanded from Denver to Chadron, Nebraska on 15 July.

RGN was given the opportunity to experience this unfamiliar airline first-hand. Operating out of Concourse A at Denver rather than an FBO, Boutique Air has a small ticket counter where one employee checks in customers and prints boarding passes until about 30 minutes before departure. At that point, the employee comes to the gate area to make sure all passengers are accounted for, tags their luggage and takes it out to the aircraft, assisted by the First Officer. In comparison to Denver's behemoth airline residents, United and Southwest – and absent any self check-in kiosks and automated luggage tags – the service from Boutique Air feels quite personal.

At departure time, passengers are guided out to the ramp and to the aircraft by the same employee who had checked them in. Seats are not assigned, so boarding is casual. Configured in an executive format, the first two rows of seats in the cabin face each other, with a retractable meeting table stowed beneath the windows. A power outlet on the wall is found beneath the table — a pleasant surprise considering that power is still missing in economy class on some of the world's largest airlines. The aft two rows face forward and have a small storage drawer beneath them, meaning there is no room beneath the chair in front of you to extend your legs, but it is okay to stretch into the aisle.

Because the aircraft does not require a flight attendant, the First Officer performs the duties of the safety briefing pre-flight. He also advises passengers that they can help themselves to water, soft drinks and peanuts once the seat belt sign is turned off during flight. The eight wide, thick-cushioned leather seats on board are amply comfortable as the single Pratt & Whitney PT6 engine rockets down the runway and into the sky. Armrests can be raised and lowered in the manner you'd find on a Business or First Class seat on many airlines; they're not hinged at the elbow like usual economy seats.

The air conditioning is fairly loud and blows strongly from the aft of the cabin. No inflight entertainment or wifi is offered, though with flight segments of less than one hour, finding customers willing to pay for such amenities would be difficult.

With a current fleet of seven PC-12s, Boutique Air expanded into Arizona on 1 August, connecting Show Low Regional Airport to Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport.

But the airline is eager to further grow its network. It recently secured the EAS contract for Greenville, Mississippi, with plans to offer flights to Nashville and DFW.

This fall, the airline will also begin flying from Merced, California to Los Angeles International Airport, and Oakland, California. In addition, new service will begin from Los Alamos, New Mexico to Albuquerque.

At this time, Boutique Air plans to stick to using the Pilatus PC-12 for all routes. Flights are priced starting at \$59 each way, making the service not only practical but affordable for those who need quick transportation to or from some of the nation's rural destinations.

With leather seats, power outlets, and an enclosed lavatory, the airline assures that the passenger experience ([#PaxEx](#)) will be "second in comfort only to your living room". A bold claim, but one that this EAS operator has no qualms about professing...with good reason.

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