

Aviation: Boeing 747 - the plane that won't lie down



The world may be littered with redundant Boeing 747 passenger jets - but Boeing is preparing for the first test flight of a new variant - the 747-8 which has just completed its taxi-tests. But it won't carry people: it's a freighter and it's due for its maiden flight today.

With tax tests completed on the 6th February, the aircraft

reached a taxi speed of 166.6 kph, well below take-off speed.

The new aircraft is a significantly different shape from the 747s we are used to: its profile is smoother with the big bump on the top levelled out; it does not have the winglets that have been a feature of 747s, and other aircraft, for several generations.

The engine runs were completed in December. It has four General Electric GEnx-2B (yes, that's really what they are called, complete with the mixed case) engines which GE says are "optimised" for this aircraft designed to "provide customers with improved fuel efficiency, reductions in emissions and noise and a lower cost of ownership."

Before being fitted last September, the engines ran more than 1,500 of bench tests plus 100 hours in flight. The engines are based on the engines fitted to the B787 and are designed to produce a 17% reduction in fuel savings as against the current 747-400 freighter. Its "noise footprint" will be reduced by 30%.

Dubbed the "Intercontinental," the B747-8 is aimed at long haul freight and most of its customers so far as in industrial countries that ship large quantities of product.

That seems to leave only one major question about the engines: why is Boeing not offering a retro-fit scheme for existing 747 passenger jets to help-out airlines that are parking 747s because

their cost-per-mile is higher than other aircraft.

In early September, Boeing said that the 747-8 was scheduled for its first flight in the fourth quarter of 2009, with its first delivery in Q3 2010.

The first aircraft left the factory in mid-November and went into the paint shop, coming out wearing a similar livery to the launch livery of the B787.