

Boeing 737 MAX returns to sky with Brazil commercial flight

December 9 2020, by Paula Ramon



Pilots are pictured in the cockpit of a Boeing 737 MAX aircraft operated by low-cost airline Gol as it sits on the tarmac before take off at Guarulhos International Airport, near Sao Paulo on December 9, 2020, as the 737 MAX returns into use more than 20 months after it was grounded following two deadly crashes

More than 20 months after it was grounded following two deadly

crashes, Boeing's 737 MAX returned to the skies Wednesday with an incident-free commercial flight in Brazil, said AFP journalists on board.

Low-cost airline Gol's Flight 4104 from Sao Paulo arrived safely in the southern city of Porto Alegre about 70 minutes after take-off, in a first that Boeing hopes will turn the page on a badly damaging crisis.

Most passengers aboard the 88-percent booked, 186-seat plane took little notice of the model number painted on its nose.

Gol's crew for their part made no mention of the fact that it was the first commercial flight for the 737 MAX since its worldwide grounding in March 2019.

"I thought it was a good flight," said passenger Naiara Providello.

"I didn't know the plane's history. I think maybe they should have informed us. But it was a good flight."

"Good to know," another passenger said when told by an AFP journalist pre-flight that the revamped plane was making its commercial debut.

"If it's here, that must mean it's safe, right?" said the man, as passengers began embarking to the soothing sounds of Brazilian bossa nova music.

'Safety first'

Gol said it was fully confident in the safety upgrades and expanded pilot training program implemented by Boeing as part of aviation regulators' conditions to recertify the plane.

"For the past 20 months, we have been carrying out the most intensive safety review in the history of commercial aviation," Gol's vice president

for operations, Celso Ferrer, said in a statement.

"Safety comes first and foremost."

A Gol spokesman told AFP that any passenger who did not feel comfortable flying on the 737 MAX would be allowed to reschedule at no cost.

Gol, the biggest domestic airline in Brazil, said it expected to have its full fleet of seven 737 MAX planes back in the air by the end of the year.

The airline, which currently has 127 planes in all, is betting big on Boeing's recovery: it has 20 more 737 MAX in the US awaiting delivery, and has confirmed firm orders for another 95.



Passengers take their seats before take off in a Boeing 737 MAX aircraft operated by low-cost airline Gol at Guarulhos International Airport, near Sao Paulo on December 9, 2020, as the 737 MAX returns into use more than 20 months after it was grounded following two deadly crashes

'We're in the sky!'

The MAX was grounded in March 2019 after two crashes that together killed 346 people.

The fallout of the 2018 Lion Air and 2019 Ethiopian Airlines crashes plunged Boeing into crisis.

The US aerospace giant has had 653 orders for the 737 MAX cancelled since last year.

Investigators said a main cause of both crashes was a faulty flight handling system known as the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System, or MCAS.

Meant to keep the plane from stalling as it ascends, the automated system instead forced the nose of the plane downward.

The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) ordered Boeing to revamp the jet and implement new pilot training protocols.

On November 18, it approved the plane to return to service. Brazil's National Civil Aviation Agency (ANAC) followed suit a week later.

They are the only two aviation regulators to green-light the plane so far.

The European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) began the process of recertifying it last month.

Crew on the Gol flight told AFP they were moved to be involved in such a key moment for the airline industry, which has been battered not only by the crisis at Boeing but by the upheaval of the coronavirus pandemic.

A pilot—one of 140 at Gol who received special training in the United States on the overhauled jet—flashed a thumbs-up from the cockpit window as the first passengers boarded.

However, Gol stuck strictly to protocol aboard the plane, going through the usual safety instructions and in-flight rituals with no mention of the noteworthiness of the occasion.

Passengers, who were all in face masks, did not appear to notice when the captain mentioned the plane's model number.

In these troubled times for global travel, however, there was still a moment of magic for at least one flyer.

"We're in the sky!" a young boy shouted as the jet took off.

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