

TRAINING



TRAINING THE WORLD

GATINEAU SCHOOL EMBRACES FOREIGN STUDENTS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ROBERT S. GRANT

As the SpiceJet Boeing 737 taxied past our silenced de Havilland DHC-7, a cluster of airport mongrel dogs began squabbling and nearby roosters added to the racket while fellow pilot Thomas Bannon and I hoped for departure clearance from Ahmedabad, 395 kilometres northwest of Mumbai, India. Little did I know that years later I would be discussing the future of Indian pilots in far-way Gatineau, Quebec. Some would likely occupy the cockpits of the same big Boeings.

Graduates from Gatineau-based International Pilot Academy enjoy welcomes from numerous nations and attain a 95 percent job placement rate thanks to 35-year-old president Jules Selwan. Developing an efficient training institution has not been a slap-happy road to riches for the Lebanese-born Selwan who emigrated to Canada in 2008. Armed with a private pilot licence and student visa, he knew that further endorsements, ratings and upgrades were unavailable in his native India. There, all airspace fell within military control. Fortunately, Selwan already knew of Canada's reputation for quality teaching.

"The school I'd started with on the outskirts of Beirut recommended Canada because they depended on Canadian-trained instructors and understood the standards developed by Transport Canada," he said.

Encouraged by an uncle employed as an aeronautical engineer, tri-lingual Selwan's decision to exchange warm Mediterranean coasts for snowbound Quebec resulted in a commercial pilot licence and instructor rating. In 2010, he and partner Nasr Salib agreed to pool resources and developed a flight school at Carp, 30 kilometres southwest of Ottawa. Economic reasons, population density and the need for expanded facilities prompted relocation to the aviation-minded community of Gatineau, across the Ottawa River in Quebec.

"Before we went into training full-time, I'd had enough experience to know we needed reliable aircraft," Selwan said. "After flying Cessna 172s in Beirut and seeing so many of them in Canada, I knew they had an excellent maintenance network so that told us spares or parts would be available within a few hours."

Gatineau-Ottawa Executive Airport's 6,000 x 150-foot asphalt runway proved an excellent locale for the progressive academy. Airport manager Gaston Cloutier welcomed the company with prompt refuelling and a discounted lease as well as a superb on-site restaurant. At the opposite end of the flight line, fellow tenant Vintage Wings of Canada added to the picture since potential students often wandered into Selwan's facilities. For IFR students, a friendly-voiced flight service station supervised traffic and Ottawa's MacDonald-Cartier Airport provided quick transit to instrument approaches. ▶

◀ Students from all over the world launch their aviation careers at International Pilot Academy.



Although Selwan's team accepts wannabee aviators from all levels and locations, he admits to high enrolment from India. As a holder of a Bachelor of Science degree from Lebanon's St. Joseph's University, he understood the contributions of embassies and their attitudes towards educational ranges in Canada. Negotiating through the Canadian Trade Commissioner became, in his words, "a great experience", and helped direct the academy to candidates within India's future-oriented 1.2 billion population.

Selwan's business research showed that few flight schools within the sub-continent's states and union territories encouraged locally born aspirants. Those who enrolled could expect training periods as long as three years. Lack of countrywide navigational aids, runway and approach lights prolonged instruction in India and sadly, many instructors subsisting within the world's sixth largest economy demanded unofficial 'wads of cash' before deigning to enter poorly maintained Cessna 150s and 172s.

Selwan's current student list shows 300 enrolments including as many as 50 full time although candidates from Australia, China, Egypt, Mexico and Saudi Arabia as well as Canada, populate the Gatineau premises. A Piper PA-38 Tomahawk with two Cessna 172s serve as principal trainers and an aerobatics-capable Grob G115-D recently joined the flight line. A

fully owned Piper PA-34 Seneca suffices for multi-IFR transitions.

In spite of working closely with the Canadian trade commissioner, Selwan found dealing with Indian officialdom challenging. Banks, for example, sometimes modify monetary policies on short notice and students find themselves unable to settle accounts. Nevertheless, the academy has never halted or delayed programs nor has Selwan been short-changed. Trust and patience stand out as major tools in his long-term business plan.

Human resources manager Maggie Ibrahim works with students before they depart their home soil. From most Indian centres, the journey lasts as long as 25 hours in the air. She ensures each individual meets Canada's admission and visa requirements then, data corrected or confirmed, academic experiences begin when she connects with exhausted arrivals the moment they step upon the glazed tiles of Ottawa's international airport.

"Someone, usually me, meets every student regardless of time, date or season and escorts them to prearranged accommodations seven minutes from the Gatineau airport," she explained. "We make sure they're comfortable and loaded with the appropriate student material. Some stay as long as two years and a top few become instructors who teach at the academy."

The majority of academy students who garner courage to leave friends and

Cessnas and Pipers make up most of the fleet.

family for an unfamiliar environment come from a civilization embracing over 200 languages with at least 80.4 percent speaking Hindi. Fortunately, English handed down from British administrators predominates. The problem, Selwan explained, becomes more than simplified face-to-face verbal communication but a matter of reaching into differing cultures and sub-cultures of a patriarchal society. Phraseology and 'Canadianisms' sometimes lead to misunderstandings.

"If a student walks into our office and says, 'I have doubts,' people here might consider such a statement in a negative sense," he explained. "What that Indian-born person really means is that he or she has a question, not that they're unhappy."

Montreal-raised Rami Sadaka, who acts as chief dispatcher and a new arrival's initial contact before progressing into ground school and airplanes, described several noteworthy cultural differences. Indian candidates, he remarked, sometimes present themselves as 'overcurious' and occasionally too quick and unprepared to step into an airplane. A willingness to adapt to the Canadian pace of appointments, meetings and briefings assures progress until the moment arrives when ab initio trainees become assertive captains instead of deferential students. In a homeland boasting 4,500-year-old



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traditions, assertiveness may be perceived as rude or arrogant. Chief flight instructor Guy Labrie, who has been teaching aviation since 1971, stresses that captains can be questioned.

“Earning their confidence isn’t easy. As an instructor, you must portray an enjoyable and positive attitude and use their first names,” Labrie explained. “Take away the ‘sir’ and show there’s no point in feeling hesitant nor are they being disrespectful. When totally relaxed and no longer afraid to ask questions, they learn rapidly.”

At the academy, 50 percent of Indian students are women. Historically, females in almost all facets of life endured discrimination but modern times have brought changes. Indian women now occupy half their country’s workforce. Consequently, students such as 19-year-old Nisha entertained few doubts in selecting aviation as a profession. She ventured to Canada from northern India’s city of Chandigarh in February 2017. Her first career move involved a stopover in the Republic of Maldives for a private pilot licence.

“There are still families who don’t allow their girls into higher education but my parents have been very open-minded,” she said. “They knew I could exist in any situation and they didn’t want me to choose any career I wouldn’t enjoy.”

Anandnarayanan Srinivasan, from southern India’s city of Pudukkottai,

considered Australia, Germany and Singapore before choosing Canada. The costs, he discovered, were similar in each country but he had encountered rumours of Canada’s reputation for producing skilled pilots. With no experience in a country grounded in cold weather, he immediately noticed much more than temperatures and spruce trees.

“I thought Canadians would be more reserved. In India, people don’t always socialize with strangers and it’s rare to see a guy and girl together. Now, I’m in a house with women students,” he said. “In Gatineau, it’s not just academy staff who treat us with respect. Our neighbours know we’re away from our homes and when they see us struggling with language or other issues, they jump in to help out.”

Although the majority of registrants at the academy originate from India, Selwan targets other nations and recently affiliated with Quebec’s College d’enseignement general et professionnel (CEGEP)’s Heritage College campus for a fully accredited education. The arrangement guides trainees from zero hours to multi-engine IFR in less than 14 months instead of the regular 18 months. With exemptions from taxes, regardless of student origin, the cost averages \$57,723 (CAD) — at least \$25,000 lower than commercial operations and similar provincial institutions.

The academy maintains one house suitable for eight students. However, the Heritage College agreement includes website accommodation links. Current office and classroom space measures 185 m² with another 185 m² optioned for expansion. Ground school and flight training takes place at Gatineau’s airport until lack of space forces temporary moves to downtown Gatineau. Extensive renovations and CBC exposure have attracted attention from local and international aspirants.

The joint agreement stipulated that flight instructors meet academy standards as well as those of Heritage College. Designated ‘professors’ bring novices to positions where they can confidently expect consideration from airlines.

Selwan is not concerned with instructor shortages. “We’re hiring the most experienced we can find and yes, it’s difficult but not impossible because wages we offer are more competitive than anyone in the market,” he said. “Our rates are at least 150 percent more than standard and that attracts professional people.”

Whatever the nationality, foreign graduates enhance Canada’s reputation and financially everyone benefits. Perhaps the next time I journey through a city such as Ahmedabad, the airliners will be crewed by Indian men and women who learned their demanding professions at Gatineau’s International Pilot Academy. ✈️