

The Eclipse 500 (this page) is a \$1.6-million five-seater that already has 2,700 suitors waiting for delivery.



The Speed of Light

Easy to maneuver and superfast, Very Light Jets are revolutionizing luxury air travel

BY CHRIS CASWELL

As teenagers, Vern Raburn and his buddy William Henry Gates used to drag race on the streets of Albuquerque in the wee hours of the morning. It was a pastime that led Bill Gates to several speeding tickets before he became the world's richest man. In turn, Raburn became the 18th employee at his pal's company, Microsoft, and, when he retired with a pot of money, he was able to buy his own jet. But that wasn't enough, so Raburn has become arguably the father of the Very Light Jet, or VLJ, that is revolutionizing the aviation world.

At a time when the least expensive private jet costs around \$4 million, Raburn's Eclipse Aviation has built more than 100 of the Eclipse 500, a five-passenger pocket rocket that was originally conceived to sell for about \$1 million (now about \$1.6 million). Raburn attracted an all-star cast of investors, including his drag-racing buddy Gates, retired DaimlerChrysler CEO Bob Eaton and retired Ford CEO Harold "Red" Poling, now a director at Eclipse.

But who wants a \$1.6-million jet? Well, there are 2,700 people who have shelled out sizable deposits at Eclipse alone, and a handful of competitors are taking deposits as fast as the ink dries on the checks. You may not know Eclipse yet, but Cessna has also jumped on the VLJ bandwagon, along with Piper, Diamond Aircraft, Embraer, and even Detroit's nemesis, Honda.

The attraction of the VLJ is simple. First, it's legal for single-pilot operation



(unlike more complex business jets that require copilots), so an owner can fly it himself, which makes it very appealing. Second, it fills a large gap in business aviation because it will have access to more than 10,000 small airports nationwide, including literally thousands that don't accommodate commercial flights. But that's just the tip of the iceberg: Imagine being able to climb aboard your own jet and fly at close to the speed of commercial airliners but still be able to land at many of the tiny airports throughout the Caribbean. Or, when you get a call that the marlin are biting off Cabo San Lucas, you'll be able to get there in just a couple of hours.