

AVSIM Commercial Aircraft Review

Sky Simulations MD-11



Product Information

Publisher: [Sky Simulations](#)

Description: MD-11 passenger and cargo airplane add-on.

Download Size:
100 MB each version

Format:
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Simulation Type:
FS9 and FS-X

Reviewed by: [Robert Mariani](#) AVSIM Staff Reviewer - April 12, 2007

Introduction

McDonnell Douglas MD-11 was developed in the 1980's as the successor to the DC-10 tri-jet. It first flew in 1990. The new plane was 18.6 feet longer, included the modern avionics suite, was more economical, and it did not have the troubled past as the DC-10. However, the plane ran into its own trouble initially as the company did not deliver the promised performance, and faced the stiff competition from Boeing, as well as the new long haul jets from Airbus.

Eventually, McDonnell Douglas was acquired by Boeing and the last widebody's tri-jet days were numbered. The final went to Lufthansa in 2000. Although the MD-11 was not a stunning success in the passenger segment, since only 200 were built, it found a new lease on life as a cargo conversion plane where it serves faithfully the largest and most well known cargo carriers today.

Sky Simulations is a new company on the Flight Sim developers scene, yet the people behind it have been around for a while. They have produced the Boeing 717, as well as a freeware Boeing 727 and were part of the Vans Air Co. which made the MD-80 series of payware aircraft a while back.

Since I loved their B-717 freeware model, I was looking forward to this release knowing that the author's visual artistry is

substantial. I was looking towards a great visual package, coupled with some great instrumentation and a flight model that, according to their site, was fully tested by the MD -11 pilots.

Installation and Documentation

The installation comes as an installer file from Simmarket and a password. An internet connection is required to install this plane. Once you run the installer and enter your information, the process begins, and depending on your connection speed, downloads and installs the 100MB package. Mine took almost half an hour on DSL, and at the time, Simmarket listed this add-on as a best-seller of the month, which could explain why the whole thing took so long.

Test System
Pentium 4 2.8 HT at 3.1 800FSB ASUS P4P800 BFG 6800 OC 128MB video Corsair XMS 3200 1Gb memory TH2GO and TrackIR4PRO Flying Time: 25 hours

The installation is somewhat cloak-and-dagger, as the installer does its thing without giving you any options or information as to what files are being placed on your computer and where. Suffice it to say that I wouldn't even think about doing this if I had a dial up connection.

This was my first experience with the Simmarket installation routine, and while it isn't complicated, it didn't give me a chance to download and save my file for backup, which then begs the question, what if I had to re-install? I prefer to have my files on a CD, but that is only my preference, and others may feel more at ease with this type of installation. The airplane installs both FS9 and FSX versions, but most of my flying was done in FS9, since FSX requires much more potent hardware than the one I currently own. At the present time there is no CD version of the airplane.

Included with the initial package were the checklist file, and the 106 page manual in PDF format. After the release of service pack 1, the authors included the flap speed chart, with airplane weights in kilograms, the paint kit in Photoshop format, as well as the cargo and

passenger load models for the popular add-on FS Passengers. Do not confuse that with the custom made loader, you'll have to fill up this baby through standard FS menus.

The manual covers many technical aspects of the MD-11, and guides the user with detailed pictures and diagrams of many of the airplane's systems. You can go through buses, heaters, and hydraulics to your heart's content. However, the one area where the manual falls short is the inclusion of any type of flight tutorial, as well as no reference to trim settings or speeds for this airplane in various phases of the flight or ground ops. While it is really nice to know how you can increase the temperature in various sections of the plane for your virtual passengers and cargo, this FS pilot would rather know how to set the trim in order to fly by the numbers.

Another interesting fact about the manual is that while some parts rely on heavy technical jargon used by the maintenance folks, other parts of it can be confusing and somewhat entertaining due to many mistakes in the English language translation. If you ever tried Google's "translate this page" function you'll know what I mean.

Virtual Cockpit

Since I saw some great preview pictures of the VC, I donned my silly hat with the Track IR 4 attached, and really wanted to start here. The first thing I noticed was how strong the reflections were on the windows and how much they diminish the visibility. The next thing was the choppy picture that slowed me to a slideshow, even in FS9, but that could be computer specific and if you have the right hardware you might enjoy the VC more than I did.

The overhead and the interior of the VC are modeled very nicely (except for the overkill on the reflections) and if you like to press the buttons and pull the switches, as well as to look at various messages that are subsequently displayed on the EICAS, you are in for a treat. Lots of things happen automatically though, so for those of you who are less technically inclined, the venerable Ctrl-E still functions well. You can also mess around with fuel transfer pumps and that could prove somewhat troublesome if you don't study the manual thoroughly. Once I accidentally deprived one of the engines of fuel, and I couldn't figure my way out of trouble. I haven't mastered the fuel transfers yet, and keeping the safety of my virtual passengers in mind, I left most of the buttons alone afterwards. On a long haul flight, the VC can be a nice place to sit and play with buttons, but you really need to print and figure out the manual first.

The one thing you'll have to learn how to do, is find your three switches on the overhead for the IRS system which then turns on your primary instruments. You cannot save the flight with the instruments on, which could be problematic if you plan to start in the sky and practice landings for example. But, you can save the flight with the PAUSE on, and then take your time to power up the PFD and ND.

Some users reported on the AVSIM forum that the ND display could be the culprit for slower FPS, or the size of the textures used in VC, but I haven't messed around with the panel.cfg yet. Most of the switches are functional, but the manual

mentions one item I couldn't get to work and that is the steering mechanism for the nose gear. Maybe it is not supposed to function, but I fail to see why it is mentioned specifically in the manual.

The flood lighting is strong and coupled with the uber-reflections on the windows, it is best to leave it off if you want to look outside.



Panel

At first glance, the 2D panel is done nicely and includes several sub-panels such as throttles, full overhead, primary instruments zoom panel, and several other pop-ups. The FS9 version also includes four wing view positions, while the FSX uses a new camera system to place views in different places.

However upon closer examination, some tool-tips and buttons are labeled incorrectly and add to the confusion for an inexperienced user. Mysteriously absent is the TCAS system, but when you click on the button labeled TRFC, you will get a pop-up panel that serves to adjust the barometer settings. Hmm...?

The other interesting implementation is the Primary Flight Display with very smooth movement of the artificial horizon and speed and altitude tapes. It also provides useful info about the flaps and slats position as well as the radar altitude, which is adjustable. In addition, the FMA Annunciations are displayed there, (those are the messages advising you of the state of the autopilot), but I couldn't figure out how certain modes work, since the manual just says what they display, and not how they operate.

For example when you engage the auto-throttle you can have "thrust" displayed on the FMA but where is that thrust set? Or if you change the mode to pitch, is the airplane supposed to maintain pitch and you should manually control the throttle levers? If so, it doesn't work quite right since in the pitch mode you have to use all of your power, all of the time, even for shallow climbs, and if you use the thrust mode the plane doesn't manage to hold the speed set on the MCP.

Ok, I may be an idiot for not knowing how the system works, but I have only piloted Cessnas and Pipers in real life. Guilty as charged! But for those idiots like myself, maybe an explanation or two in the manual would help. If it is in there, I couldn't find it - or figure it out.

One thing the PFD doesn't have is the V speed information nor any speed bugs, so for the take-off or landing you'll just have to fly by the seat of your pants. Or, use the speed chart provided in SP1 and try to match it by playing with throttles and pitch, which brings us to the hybrid FMC, integrated with the Skysim's version of the MD-11 navigational display.

While the unit looks like the airliner FMC that could be found on the big MD-11, it really is only the FS GPS in new clothes and a few more features. In addition to all the functionality of the standard FS GPS500, this unit also displays the weight info, in pounds, and one of the pages is used to control NAV radios. There is no VNAV implementation, and LNAV works pretty much like the standard FS autopilot with either the NAV or GPS modes. The two have been given different names,

VOR and NAV, and those are displayed on the PFD. The ND looks like the GPS display and can be zoomed in or out and de-cluttered just like the GPS, albeit with a few new buttons placed on the EHSI. The new feature is the VOR mode which adds the VOR rose over the display, as well as the VOR needles and ADF pointer, should you require it for your NDB approaches.

While I like the simplicity and the appearance of the FMC, I think it adds very little functionality and takes away from the other detailed instrumentation on this jet. My guess is that it will also not "fly" well with the die-hard FMC crowd, as there is no possibility to enter any information into it. The LNAV feature works only if the flight plan has been loaded in the sim, and you cannot import your own plan or define anything else outside of default FS functions. Sorry, no custom SID's, STAR's, or updates to the database.

Exterior Model

In this area this plane shines in all of its glory. Everything that should move or twist does so very nicely, and the service vehicle animations are smooth and very well done. The trucks and loaders don't just appear from nowhere. Rather, they drive up from the side or behind the airplane. Very well done indeed.



On the outside, MD-11 is a wonderful looking airplane. Other than being heavy on my computer's FPS, no complaints here.

The sub-panel that controls all the animations is included and to make things more interesting, you can even open the captain's and first officer's window from here. Another cool feature included in this offering, are the windshield wipers that have separate controls and speeds for both the captain's and the first officer's window. The wipers are visible from the inside of the VC, as well as from the outside view. The 32 bit textures are sharp and well done, but if you are running an older system with 128MB video card like mine, they do take a heavy toll on your graphics. In FSX spot view, this plane takes 4-5 FPS more than the default 737 and fairs slightly worse then the default 747. The plane comes with plenty of 32 bit textures, and judging by the lack of repaints in the AVSIM library, most users are happy with the offering.





Animations done well. The top row shows how service vehicles drive-up to the MD-11. Very cool! New camera in FSX and a night shot of cargo version service vehicles.

Sounds

According to the Skysim web page, the sounds were recorded at the engine maintenance area, and while occasionally sounding abrupt in its tone and pitch changes, they add positively to this sim. In addition to the engine sounds, you'll hear the whole GPWS, whoop-whoop alarms and bells, together with that stern mechanical female voice that warns you about the take off configuration and other no-no's. If only the authors have specified what that configuration should be, the whole airplane would feel much more finished.

Airfile

When the first version of the airplane was released, lots of people on the forums had something to say about the airfile. The positive comments were in short supply mainly due to the fact that the plane's nose would drop like a rock on the final approach and weight and balance were very tricky due to the MD-11's tail tank that would throw things out of whack in most critical phases of the flight, such as take-off and landing. Another reason the users were not happy, was the fact that the feel of this "heavy" was more like that of an oversized Cessna, which could be thrown around the sky with the greatest of ease, and minimal inputs of the yoke. After the service pack was released, the airplane was easier and more stable to fly, yet if you search the forums you may still find people modifying the airfile in order to get a better, heavier, flying feeling.

I found that the first version was basically unflyable at max. gross weight, and the trim would not provide adequate authority to maintain flight. It would eventually end up in the most aft position and after that, you would have to make sure the CVR was working and hope that the crash crew would get there on time. Thankfully CVR is modeled, but only as another button to flip.

After the SP1 release, I could take off and land much better, yet the instability and speed oscillations were still a problem for me. Did I ever fly the real thing? No, only as a passenger, but I would love to have some sort of guidance from the authors in the form of a tutorial or sample flight, with engine and trim settings included, or at least a recommended performance chart which would suggest how to set it up under varying weights and environmental conditions.

Even after service pack 1 was released, I found this aircraft to be too light on controls and extremely hard to setup properly on final. In addition, climb performance is somewhat of a mystery as I had to disconnect the auto-throttle and firewall the gas in order to maintain a lackluster 1500 fpm climb rate bellow FL 200. What was worse, on a flight from Anchorage to Seattle the throttles were left in the full max position for the entire flight and I could barely creep up to Mach 0.75 at FL310, even though the engine instruments were in the red all the time.

In the real world, that would be the end of those nice P&W's, yet in this sim it didn't affect them at all. For a model that prides itself on a completely accurate hydraulic failure simulation, and real world pilot testing, I found it hard to swallow that engine power and performance are so out of touch. If the plane is complex and should be flown differently then pedal-to-the-metal, the authors should have provided some sort of guidance on how that is to be accomplished.





Great on the outside with lots of potential if the development and support continue.

Summary

This MD-11 is a wonderful looking aircraft, with lots of potential to be an overall excellent add-on. Currently in the post SP1 environment, the plane still lacks the essential tutorial on flight operations, adequate flight model, and a better FMC to justify its premium price.

At first the authors might have been caught out with the popularity of this package, and tech support via the forum was slow. They seem to have improved that and addressed at least some of the concerns people had, and I hope they can continue to respond in a similar fashion in future.

On the other hand, I can understand the lack of the proper FMC, as being overly complex for some users, but I cannot accept that with all the technical info this airplane was developed with, the authors couldn't have provided a better flight manual and a more refined flight model.

Hopefully, this MD-11 will continue to mature as well as its counterpart in the real world, and offer the simulation fans more improvements and lots of reliable and enjoying flights in the future.

What I Like About Sky Simulations MD-11

- Exterior model and service vehicles
- The general look and feel of the VC
- The 2D panel- visually
- All of the animations imaginable
- FS9 and FSX model with both cargo and passenger models, two engine variants, plenty of liveries

What I Don't Like About Sky Simulations MD-11

- The flight model - too "light" and in need of tweaking
- VC reflections and FPS hungry textures
- FMC hybrid
- The absence of flight tutorial

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