



Tech Talk

Aircraft Cabin Safety & Formula E©

by John McCarthy

Hello and welcome once again to Tech Talk. The last couple of years have been particularly tragic for the airline industry, with a series of highly publicised incidents making headlines throughout the globe. Causes range from pilot error, to co-pilot suicide, terrorist attack, passenger aircraft being shot down by a missile, technical problems and improper maintenance, and of course the puzzling disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, which vanished back on the 8th of March 2014 and still hasn't been found despite the largest and longest search operation in history. Conspiracy theories still abound, some more ridiculous than others, but the truth is that many forlorn relatives of those lost without trace still cling to the hope that they may be found alive. Although public confidence in air travel remains high – it is, after all, statistically by far the safest way to travel – recent surveys have shown that 30% of passengers feel nervous or experience some level of anxiety immediately before taking a flight. Indeed many cool-headed passengers, such as myself, feel the need to down a few sniffers prior to boarding in order to obtain a little Dutch courage.

Naturally, airlines and airports dedicate considerable time and energy to improving safety and security. A way of potentially saving thousands of lives from plane crashes was very recently announced by a Ukranian researcher, who's been working for the last three years on what he believes to be a very promising project. He claims it could save the life of all passengers on board should the aircraft get into serious difficulties. It involves using a detachable cabin joined to the main airframe, which could be ejected and detached from the engines, wings and cabin at any time during take off, mid-flight or landing. On being released from the aircraft, the cabin would gently descend to the ground or sea on huge parachutes, and on landing inflatables would protrude from the bottom to act like shock absorbers, thereby providing additional safety. The prototype also includes storage space to hold luggage under the cabin, so that passengers wouldn't lose any of their personal belongings.

Obviously, there have been mixed reactions to this. While aircraft engineers remain hugely sceptical, maintaining that a cabin would greatly compromise the structural integrity of an aircraft, and airline companies will probably remain recalcitrant, as it would increase prices, reduce seating capacity and use more fuel; public reaction has predictably been a little more enthusiastic. In a questionnaire, admittedly conducted by the inventor himself, 95% of respondents claimed they would be willing to buy a more expensive ticket in order to use such a safety system. We will of course keep you up to date with this story, as and if it develops.

In the world of sport, Formula 1 is very much in the vanguard of hi-tech; indeed, for some it's the very epitome of state-of-the-art developments in engine technology, electronics and aerodynamics. The problem is that it isn't a particularly eco-friendly sport and teams require hefty financial backing in order to survive. As many experts are predicting the demise of the internal combustion engine in the not-too-distant future, thoughts inevitably turn to racing electric cars, and indeed the inaugural championship of Formula E began in September 2014. We're now approximately a third of the way through the second year, and for the first time ever, the City of Lights will be hosting the event on April 23rd, having been endorsed by the likes of Leonardo Dicaprio and Richard Branson.

Earlier this month, the location and circuit layout were unveiled before the media, government officials, local authorities and distinguished guests in the Town Hall. The circuit comprises 14 turns around Les Invalides and the Tomb of Napoleon, an area which will combine world-famous historical monuments with visions of the future. In a way, this will provide a logical continuation to the recent Climate Change talks held in Paris and all the agreements achieved. Apart from having the potential to become a highly lucrative event in the sporting calendar, hosting this race is also a way of inciting interest in electric vehicles and sustainable mobility in France and promoting the considerable advances that have been made in this technology.

In a week where the press has published several truly alarming reports about the increase of air pollution in practically all of the world's major cities, any sport that increases public awareness of this scourge is to be applauded.

That's all we have time for, I'm afraid. You've been listening to Tech Talk, brought to you by Englishwaves.fr.