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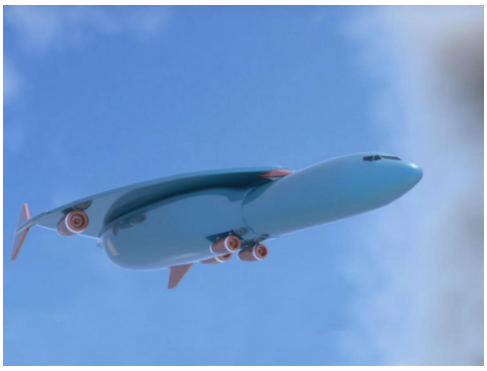

TechTalk

Concorde 2 ©

by John McCarthy

Hi and it's a great pleasure to welcome you once again to Tech Talk. It's been nearly a dozen years since the last ill-fated flight of Concorde, although of course the plane's destiny had been more or less sealed following the crash in Gonesse on the 25th of July 2000. Experts determined the crash was caused by a metallic strip which had fallen from another plane minutes previously, punctured a tyre which then exploded, a fragment of which hit the fuel tank causing a leak and subsequent explosion. It proved to be the only fatal accident involving Concorde, but this, along with other environmental factors, such as atmospheric pollution plus limited commercial success, more or less ensured its demise.

For over a quarter of a century, the sleek Anglo-French airplane represented the jet set era of the late 20th Century, in much the same way as BOAC, TWA, PAN AM and BEA had been so evocative of the so-called 'golden age' of air travel in the 1950s and '60s. Well, a successor to Concorde is very much on the cards, and in July last year Airbus won US approval for a patented design to build an aircraft capable of flying at Mach 4.5: nearly three times as fast as Concorde. The designs resemble a futuristic aircraft that would look more at home in a Hollywood sci-fi studio, than the actual Concorde itself. More recently, Airbus filed a second patent, and suddenly the prospect of flying from London to New York faster than it takes to drive across the English capital becomes closer to reality. Other possibilities: London to San Francisco in three hours; San Francisco to Tokyo: another three hours. This could herald a new beginning in the rush to revitalise supersonic air travel.

Obviously, this has generated considerable press interest, but it should be stressed that the whole concept is still at the patent stage and it's unclear whether this revolutionary plane will ever make it beyond the drawing board. One can but dream… Imagine taking off vertically with a rocket motor taking you through the sound barrier and up to 35,000 feet. Wing-mounted ramjets would then push you through to a final cruising speed of approximately 3,425 mph – that's five and a half thousand kilometres per hour, at an altitude of thirty thousand metres, one hundred thousand feet.

I once had the privilege of crossing the Atlantic in Concorde—London to New York–although I hasten to add it was my boss who footed the bill, and in comparison the figures are quite risible (although of course at the time were so impressive: 1,300 mph, 60,000 feet above the Atlantic – that's 20,000 feet higher than most jets fly in this day and age - arrival in the Big Apple before you'd even taken off from dear old Blighty).

Nonetheless, future passenger supersonic jets will have to solve exactly the same problem that plagued Concorde and limited its commercial success: The dreaded sonic boom. Airbus designers have reportedly found a way to reduce this by creating a bulbous outline, which will make the aircraft quieter and thereby reduce noise pollution.

However, before you all reach for your credit cards, according to initial reports the market envisaged will be principally business travel and VIP passengers – only 20 per flight – so the cost of a ticket could well burn an enormous hole in your pocket.