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# Whither Concorde?



## The Future of Aviation Now Seems Sadly Dated

The supersonic Concorde passenger jet, shown in Air France livery. The European Concorde has had an exemplary safety record, but that hasn't guaranteed it smooth sailing. (Air France/AP Photo)

By David Morgan



**NEW YORK, July 25** — Having logged approximately 69 million miles since it began commercial service in 1976, the Concorde has had an exemplary safety record, but that hasn't guaranteed it smooth sailing.



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Even before it took to the air, the supersonic aircraft flown by Air France and British Airways has battled environmentalists, foreign competition, rising fuel prices, and recently politicians engaged in a tug of war between European Union countries and the American aviation industry.

## A Rare Experience

The Concorde has been perceived as a luxury mode of transit for yes-frills fliers eager to cut their trans-Atlantic travel time in half, or to experience the thrill of gazing upon the curvature of the Earth at 60,000 feet, 5 miles above jumbo jets.

But the supersonic's maintenance costs are high, and the plane's aerodynamics require a slim cabin that limits the number of passengers. Some planes may do double-duty, crisscrossing

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sidebar

[History of the Concorde](#)

**In This Series**

[Air France Concorde Crash Coverage](#)

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[AirFrance](#)

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the ocean in a single day, but the two airlines normally have only six daily flights scheduled between them.

And because the plane's engines require an enormous amount of gas to reach a cruising speed of Mach 2 (1,336 mph), the plane carries about a ton of fuel for each of its 100 trans-Atlantic passengers. The high cost of jet fuel has contributed to a ticket price of about \$8,000, making supersonic flights a rarefied experience.

Despite recent talks between Boeing and Russia's Tupolev to turn the Cold War relic Tu-144 supersonic craft (now used for research purposes) into a commercial jetliner, faster-than-sound aircraft have had just a toehold in the airline industry.

And although Air France and British Airways both claim their Concorde flights are now profitable (particularly their charter excursions), that is no doubt abetted by the enormous write-off of development costs that the governments of both France and England undertook just to get the plane off the ground.

### **Nowhere to Land?**

Despite their intriguing looks and swiftness, these supersonic jets have had a major black mark against them: They're noisy. In the late 1960s, efforts by American aeronautics firms to launch a supersonic jet were thwarted by noise and environmental concerns — jets flying faster than sound, causing violent sonic booms, were banned over the United States.

Lawsuits temporarily blocked the Concorde from landing at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport while environmental impact studies were conducted, and complaints to Washington's Dulles Airport almost ended the plane's service there as soon as it began.

Despite the fact that it does not technically adhere to noise regulations for commercial aircraft, the Concorde was granted a waiver to land at JFK — when it has attained quieter, subsonic speed. But a recent brouhaha between EU nations and American aviation companies may end that waiver, eliminating the jet's trans-Atlantic runs.

Because the EU has banned the use of "hushkits" — the retrofitting of older aircraft to meet current noise standards — U.S. aircraft

manufacturers fear that the market for the resale of older American planes will dwindle, and the book value of their fleets will fall. In retaliation, the House passed a resolution last year that asked the Transportation Department to revoke the Concorde's permission to land at American airports.

The matter is still being debated between the administration and its European counterparts. But the ax poised over the Concorde can only scare off others who might want to develop competing supersonic craft.

### **No New Planes on the Horizon**

The Soviets were the only real competitor to the Anglo-French consortium behind the Concorde. Their supersonic jet, the 160-seat Tu-144 derisively nicknamed "Concordsky," made its maiden flight on Dec. 31, 1968, just days before the Concorde took off for the first time.

The Tu-144 carried out several trial flights in the early 1970s, but the project was shelved after a 1973 crash in France at the Le Bourget air show that killed 13 people. Research into other supersonic aircraft stalled.

Because supersonic flight requires gas-guzzling, noisy engines, new plane designs are instead aiming for increasing passenger quantity rather than speed — super-sized jumbo jets like the 555-seat Airbus A3XX and the proposed 524-seat Boeing 747X. In fact, no new Concorde have been built in 20 years; as the '70s oil crisis scared off customers, only 20 were ever built, and at the start of this week only 12 were in operation (the other eight were consigned to museums or cannibalized for parts).

It is understood that the planes have a limited lifespan, with no replacements in sight. Air France has not finalized its plans for Concorde, citing a study being conducted to measure the cost-effectiveness of upgrading its fleet to last to the year 2030.

British Airways has been upgrading its planes' interiors, as well as renovating the on-ground facilities for its Concorde passengers, so it is seeking to at least maintain the classiest part of its operations.

### **And Who Is Flying?**

Between Air France and British Airways, the two carriers took aloft more than 3.7 million passengers aboard the Concorde in just its first 20 years of service. Many of these were attracted to the time factor, and a lessening of the effects of jet lag.

But the majority of Concorde passengers are the well-to-do for whom time really *is* money, or in the case of those traveling on an expense account, somebody else's. Royalty, business tycoons and movie stars are typically on the passenger manifest.

Approximately two-thirds of Air France's Concorde passengers are business travelers, and more than half of those are U.S. citizens.

The planes are also available for charters, as was the case with today's doomed flight, which had been booked for a German tour group

One such charter program was promoted by the Abercrombie & Kent travel agency, which specializes in luxury vacations. Its "Around the World" package takes tourists on a 26-day globe-trotting tour via Concorde. The cost? An all-inclusive \$62,500.

"Our 'Around the world' programs have been very popular," says Christa Brantsch, director of public relations for Abercrombie & Kent. "It did carry a certain amount of prestige to it [going by Concorde]. We actually have a high percentage of repeat customers."

### Grounded?

Just days ago came the discovery by British Airways of cracks in the wings of its Concorde (which prompted them to take one out of service), and Air France later admitted to finding what it referred to as "microcracks" in four of its six Concorde aircraft.

Both airlines insisted that passenger safety was not jeopardized.

After the crash in Gonesse today, France's transport minister called for the grounding of Air France's remaining Concorde. British Airways, which owns seven Concorde, canceled its two remaining trans-Atlantic Concorde flights tonight.

### History of the Concorde

- Nov. 29, 1962: The French and British governments

- sign an agreement to develop prototypes for a supersonic transport aircraft, eventually dubbed the Concorde. Aerospatiale of France and the British Aircraft Corporation Ltd. — later known as British Aerospace PLC — sign a similar pact the same day.
- December 1967: The first test version of the plane, the Concorde 001, is unveiled by Aerospatiale.
  - March 2, 1969: The first Concorde test flight takes place, with the Concorde 001 traveling from Toulouse, France, to Le Bourget, France.
  - April 9, 1969: The Concorde 002, manufactured by the British Aircraft Corporation, makes its first test flight.
  - Dec. 3, 1973: The first commercial-production Concorde flies its maiden voyage.
  - Sept. 1, 1975: As part of the testing process, a Concorde aircraft completes two round-trip flights across the North Atlantic within a single day.
  - Jan. 21, 1976: The first Concorde passenger flights take place. A British Airways Concorde travels from London to Bahrain, while Air France passengers ride the Concorde from Paris to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
  - May 24, 1976: British Airways and Air France launch Concorde service to Washington from London and Paris.
  - Oct. 17, 1977: The U.S. Supreme Court overrules a New York Port Authority ban on Concorde flights into and out of the New York area; regular service to and from New York begins later that year.
  - Feb. 15, 1985: A Concorde jet flies from London to Sydney, Australia, in a record time of 17 hours and three minutes.
  - April 14, 1990: A Concorde flight breaks the London-to-New York record for a passenger flight, completing the journey in two hours, 54 minutes and 30 seconds.
  - Oct. 12–13, 1992: A Concorde operated by Air France flies around the world in a record time of 32 hours and 49 minutes.
  - Oct. 8, 1998: A large piece of a Concorde's rudder falls off during a flight from London to New York. The plane lands safely.
  - July 23, 2000: British Airways discloses that cracks had been found in the wings of all seven of its Concorde jets. Air France makes a similar disclosure the following day, having found cracks in four of its Concorde.
  - July 25, 2000: An Air France Concorde en route to New York crashes outside Paris shortly after takeoff, killing all 109 people on board and four people on the ground.
- *The Associated Press*

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