

Flying car a 'step closer': Terrafugia (Update)

April 2 2012, by Andrew Beatty



The prototype "Transition" car plane. Massachusetts-based firm Terrafugia said their production prototype "Transition" car-plane had completed an eight-minute test flight, clearing the way for it to hit the market within a year.

Drivers hoping to slip the surly -- and traffic congested -- bonds of Earth moved a step closer to realizing their dream, as a US firm said it had successfully tested a street-legal plane.

Massachusetts-based firm Terrafugia said their production prototype

"Transition" car-plane had completed an eight-minute test flight, clearing the way for it to hit the market within a year.

"With this flight, the team demonstrated an ability to accomplish what had been called an impossible dream," said founder Carl Dietrich.

The two-seater craft, which has the rounded features of a Fiat 500 and collapsible wings, is on presale for \$279,000 and some 100 vehicles have already been ordered.

While many companies have successfully built a flying car, none have succeeded in producing more than a handful of models.

But things have changed since the clunky Curtiss Autoplane hopped and spluttered into action in the early 1900s.

New materials and computer-aided design mean today's flying cars are cheaper and lighter to build.

They also look more like "Blade Runner" than "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang."

The successful test flight has given hope to aficionados that this staple of science fiction is a step closer to reality.

"Is it going to be like the Jetsons with everyone driving one in five years? No," admitted Winfield Keller, vice president of The International Flying Car Association, a trade group.

"But we are getting to the point where 10, maybe 15 years from now that the people owning and operating (them) will be everyday people."

In the meantime manufacturers hope they can build something that

appeals to border security agencies, the police or the military, as well as hobbyists.

Terrafugia is targeting pilots looking for a bit more flexibility and fewer hangar fees.

Spanning 90 inches (2.3m) the same as a car, it fits into a normal-sized garage, before unfurling a 26 foot (8m) wingspan.

The Transition, they say offers unparalleled freedom of movement, with a range of 490 miles (787 kilometers) and without the need to check bags.

But to take advantage, would-be owners will need to have both a driver's and pilot's license -- with a minimum of 20 hours of flying time.

The craft needs 2,500 feet (762 meters) of runway for takeoff, meaning pulling onto the shoulder and escaping the traffic is not really an option.

"The Transition Street-Legal Airplane is now a significant step closer to being a commercial reality," the company said.

At least two other companies are racing to bring an autoplane to the market.

Dutch company PAL-V has tested a prototype gyrocopter-style car. It hopes to now build a full production prototype and to have the first deliveries by 2014.

California-based Moller International has built a personal vertical takeoff and landing aircraft, although it requires a little more training to operate.

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