

Flying Car Gets Closer To Reality With Test Flight

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Flying cars aren't just science fiction anymore.

Woburn, Mass.-based Terrafugia Inc. said Monday that its prototype flying car has completed its first flight, bringing the company closer to its goal of selling the flying car within the next year. The vehicle — dubbed the Transition — has two seats, four wheels and wings that fold up so it can be driven like a car. Last month, it flew at 1,400 feet for eight minutes. Commercial jets fly at 35,000 feet.

Around 100 people have already put down a \$10,000 deposit to get a Transition when they go on sale, and those numbers will likely rise after Terrafugia introduces the Transition to the public later this week at the New York Auto Show. But don't expect it to show up in too many driveways. It's expected to cost \$279,000.

And it won't help if you're stuck in traffic. The car needs a runway.

The flying car has always had a special place in the American imagination. Inventors have been trying to make them since the 1930s, according to Robert Mann, an airline industry analyst who owns R.W. Mann & Co. in Port Washington, N.Y.

But Mann thinks Terrafugia has come closer than anyone to making the flying car a reality. The government has already granted the company's request to use special tires and glass that are lighter than normal automotive ones, to make it easier for the vehicle to fly. The government has also temporarily exempted the Transition from the requirement to equip vehicles with electronic stability control, which would add about six pounds to the vehicle. The Transition is currently going through a battery of automotive crash tests to make sure it meets federal safety standards.

Mann said Terrafugia was helped by the Federal Aviation Administration's decision five years ago to create a separate set of standards for light sport aircraft. The standards govern the size and speed of the plane and licensing requirements for pilots, which are less restrictive than requirements for pilots of larger planes. Terrafugia says an owner would need to pass a test and complete 20 hours of flying time to be able to fly the Transition, a relatively low hurdle for pilots.

The Transition can reach around 70 miles per hour on the road and 115 in the air, spokesman Steven Moscaritolo said. It flies using a 23-gallon tank of automotive fuel and burns 5 gallons per hour in the air. On the ground, it gets 35 miles per gallon.

Mann questions the size of the market for the Transition. The general aviation market has been in decline for two decades, he said, largely because of fuel costs and the high cost of liability for manufacturers. Also, fewer people are learning how to fly.

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"This is not going to be an inexpensive aircraft to produce or market," he said. "It has some uniqueness, and will get some sales, but the question is, could it ever be a profitable enterprise?"

Mann sees the western U.S. as the most likely market, where people could fly instead of driving long distances.

Terrafugia has been working on flying cars since 2006, and has already pushed back the launch once. Last summer the company said it would have to delay expected 2011 deliveries due to design challenges and problems with parts suppliers.

With the appearance in New York, the company hopes to attract the eye of customers as well as investors.

"We are introducing ourselves as a viable company to the automotive world," Moscaritolo said.

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