

First Airbus A350 Flight Reopens Wide-Body Race

Lori Hinnant, Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The Airbus A350's maiden flight ended with a safe landing on Friday, setting the stage for intensifying competition with U.S. rival Boeing in the long-haul wide-body aircraft market.

The four-hour flight marks a key step on the path to full certification for the jet, which can carry between 250 and 400 passengers and is the European aircraft maker's best hope for catching up in a long-haul market dominated by Boeing's 787 and 777. Airspace at the airport in the southern French city of Toulouse, where Airbus has its headquarters, closed for both take-off and landing.

Airbus has 613 orders for the A350, and hopes Friday's flight will bring it momentum heading into next week's Paris Air Show, which is already shaping up as a battle of the wide-body planes.

More than half of the twin-engine jet consists of lightweight carbon-fiber designed to save on jet fuel, which makes up half the cost of long-haul flights.

The A350, which was delayed for two years as Airbus hashed out the new design, is a direct competitor with the 787 Dreamliner — minus the lithium ion batteries now under investigation for unexplained smoldering. Airbus abandoned its plans to use the lithium ion batteries despite their advantages in weight, power and re-charging speed.

"The A350 has the same innovations more or less as the Dreamliner, the 787," said Gerard Feldzer, a French aviation expert and former airline pilot. "It is pretty much equivalent, the same amount or proportion of carbon for the lightness of the material, just as many electrical devices."

Boeing's list prices for its 787 line range from \$206 million to \$243 million. Airbus lists prices ranging from \$254 million to \$332 million, and had 613 orders as of May, compared with 890 orders for the 787. Steep discounts are common on large orders, although the details are rarely made public.

Airbus claims the A350 burns 25 percent less fuel than the Boeing due to its lighter weight, redesigned Rolls Royce engines and new aerodynamics.

"The first flight is a very special moment in an aerospace company," Tom Enders, CEO of Airbus parent company EADS, said late Thursday.

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