
First electric planes fly over English Channel

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Several companies in different countries are developing electric planes, in hopes of offering a fuel-free flight alternative for the future — and the battle to perform world "firsts" in electric planes is heating up as the technology becomes more durable.

Amid fanfare, European planemaker Airbus flew its E-fan plane from Lydd, England, to the French port of Calais on Friday morning. The plane operates exclusively on batteries, and since there's no oil or water, the 20-foot long, 1300-pound jet releases zero emissions.

About 12 hours before Airbus' Channel flight, French pilot Hugues Duval took his two-engine, one-seat Cricri plane from Calais to Dover and back.

Because he lacked authorization to take off from Calais, another fuel-driven plane towed his 100-kilogram (220-pound) Cricri for the start of the trip, he told The Associated Press. Then he flew autonomously back to Calais and landed safely.

He said he reached a speed of 150 kilometers (90 miles) an hour on his 52-kilometer (31-mile) journey.

Duval told The AP that his successful flight was a "relief" and an "important moment" after years of fine-tuning the plane and flying it over land.

Airbus officials gathered in Calais to celebrate the landing of the E-fan would not comment on Duval's trip.

The E-fan took its maiden voyage in March 2014, and has taken off 100 times since its latest flight at the Paris Air Show last month. Airbus aims to put the two-seater on the market in 2017, targeting sales at training facilities for entry-level pilots.

"It's a great victory, but it's also a start. For us it's an adventure that permits us" to imagine commercial flight on electric or hybrid planes, said pilot Didier Esteyne, who flew the Airbus plane Friday. "It's really the beginning of great innovations."

The choice of flight path was not coincidental: In 1909, French pilot Louis Bleriot was the first person to fly a plane across the English Channel.

Safety was of secondary priority for Bleriot — he was concentrated on winning 1,000 pounds in prize money from the British Daily Mail newspaper by performing the feat first.

For Airbus' flight Friday, security professionals were out in full force, with helicopters and rescue speed boats trailing the E-fan.

Electric flight is a nascent sector of the aviation industry, so safety regulations are still in development. Airbus and the French civil aviation authorities worked together to create a test flight program for the jets.

While the E-fan only seats two for now, the aircraft manufacturer is aiming bigger down the line. Chief Technical Officer Jean Botti told The Associated Press at the Paris Air Show last month, "Our objective here is to make a hybrid-electric hundred seater for the future," calling it an ambition Airbus could realize in the next 15 years.

Slovenian company Pipistrel was also hoping to send its electric plane across the Channel this week. But engine-maker Siemens blocked the trip at the last minute, saying the motor didn't have authorization to fly over water, Pipistrel general manager Ivo Boscarol told The AP.

Boscarol said he felt his plane was ready for the journey and estimated that about 10 other electric planes currently in development are also capable of making the flight. He said he hopes to continue working with Siemens in the future to develop the plane.

He compared this week's flights to those of Bleriot 106 years ago, saying "the Channel, in aviation, has a special place. It's kind of religious."
