

First supersize Airbus assembled

The assembly of the world's largest aircraft, the Airbus A380, has begun at a £240m factory in Toulouse, France.

The 555-seater super airliner is expected to revolutionise the airline industry and could lead to a doubling in Airbus' profits, some experts say.

Fittingly for a huge plane, the factory itself is very big: 490 metres long, 250 metres wide and 46 metres tall.

The first flight of an A380 will take place in 2005 and by 2008 production should reach four aircraft per month.

Sections of the aircraft have been manufactured in the UK, Germany, Spain and France before being transported to Toulouse for assembly.

Airbus has already secured 129 orders for the double-decker aircraft from 11 airlines, including Qantas, Lufthansa, Air France and Virgin Atlantic.

Among other airlines that are considering placing orders are at least one US, one Chinese and one Japanese carrier.

Two or three other Asian airlines may also buy the aircraft, according to chief executive Noel Forgeard.

A380 SPECIFICATION

Length: 73m
Wingspan: 79.8m
Height: 24.1m
Typical capacity: 555
Max capacity: 840
Engines: 4
Cruising speed: 0.85 mach

The A380 has wider seats, more legroom and 50% more floor space than its nearest competitor, the Boeing 747 jumbo jet.

It also has a 9,000 miles flight range.

Boeing, which in 2001 pulled out of the race to build the world's biggest airliner, says the market for very large aircraft is much smaller than Airbus thinks.

Instead, Boeing has decided to target the middle of the aircraft market where it thinks growth will come in the future.

Its 7E7 Dreamliner was launched in April.

The aircraft, Boeing's first new civilian airliner for more than 10 years, will be considerably smaller than the A380.

Boeing says it is designed with fuel and cost efficiency in mind and many more airports will be able to handle it than the A380.

What is your reaction to this announcement? What difference will it make to air travel? Send your

comments using the form below.

Your comments

Great plane, shame that Britain only builds the wings, with Germany and France building the other 80%. Britain in the heart of Europe, or hanging on to the coat tails of Europe?

Ben Mearns, Emsworth, England

Maybe one day we can turn our attentions to faster aircraft again

Rob Peppin, Bristol, UK

After the controversial ending of supersonic air travel where Britain and France were the only players, it is nice to see that together with other European partners, we will once again be at the cutting edge and world leaders in aviation. Maybe one day we can turn our attentions to faster aircraft again as we seem to now have the edge in size. I look forward to seeing the first A380 fly in 2005.

Rob Peppin, Bristol, UK

After working in the airline industry I feel that planes this size should not even take off! I am now much more comfortable with cruise ship interiors!

Dave Paton, Leatherhead, Surrey

Something that big should have more engines - eight at least, and more wings. I would prefer it to be a bi-plane.

Michael Larcombe, Ruislip, Middlesex

I'm sure this will help continue the downward trend in airline ticket prices but would also hope that it's been designed to be less polluting in its operation for the number of people carried.

Simon Barker, Teddington, Middlesex

Looking forward to this beast lumbering out of Heathrow

Paul B, Reading, UK

Although the glossy splurge shows bars, shops etc, in reality the airlines will probably cram as many people in as possible. Still looking forward to this beast lumbering out of Heathrow though.

Paul B, Reading, UK

At last something for Europe to be proud of! Which airports will be able to handle the aircraft, as presumably a new infrastructure will be needed to accommodate the aircraft's size, such as airbridges etc?

Alex Hancocks, Hove, England

Just the idea of having enough seating room available is enough to make me enthusiastic. Of course Boeing will say this is a silly project, but then flying second class with your knees somewhere near your ears is not exactly a great idea either. But does a bigger plane, carrying more passengers mean fewer flights since more people can travel in one go? Interesting idea.

David, UK

I think it looks scary. I am wary of flying, and the thought of such a large plane in the sky scares me. Not sure I would want to go on it.

Clare Atkins, Chesterfield, England

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