



March 14, 2008 Edition > Section: [Business](#) > Printer-Friendly Version

Moguls Set To Approach the Sound Barrier

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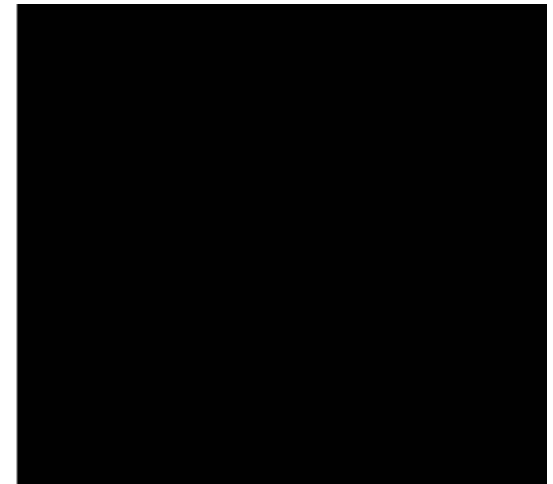
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Masters of the universe, start your engines — and break out your check books. The makers of the private jet that became a must-have accessory for super-rich celebrities and corporate titans, the Gulfstream V, are announcing plans to supersede the iconic aircraft with a new model, the Gulfstream 650.

At 704 miles an hour, the new plane's top speed approaches the speed of sound. The new G650 has a range of 7,000 nautical miles, which means it will be able to reach most of the world nonstop from New York, save for Antarctica, Madagascar, Australia, and parts of South Asia.

"I am sure it's going to be in very high demand," a charter planner who oversees a Westchester County-based fleet of Gulfstreams, Janine Vesey of

Global Air Charters, said.

A mock-up of the jet was unveiled yesterday at Gulfstream's Savannah, Ga., factory, but the designers clearly have their eye on northern New Jersey's Teterboro Airport, the hub for business aviation in the New York area. The G650's 99,600-pound maximum take-off weight squeaks in just under the 100,000 pound maximum allowed under an agreement between Teterboro and its neighbors.

The list price for the G650 is about \$58.5 million, but it won't be ready for delivery until 2012. Taking the required pre-payment schedule into account, the cost rises to almost \$65 million.

Upon its introduction in 1997, the G-V or "G-five" quickly became the favorite of the flying elite looking for speed, privacy, and a touch of glamour.

"If you want panache arriving in Aspen or St. Moritz, you better be arriving in a Gulfstream," an aviation commentator and pilot, John Nance, said. The G-V was reportedly the favored ride of Apple's Steve Jobs and golfer Greg Norman, and it even became the plane of choice for the CIA when it whisked terrorism suspects around the globe.

However, in recent years some of the bloom has come off the G-V rose, as a Canadian-made jet, the Global Express XRS, muscled in.

"Our Global Express XRS is the market leader right now as far as the long-range segment," a spokeswoman for Bombardier Aerospace, Danielle Boudreau, said. "It's selling extremely well. Our backlog is full for the next three years."

The Canadian jet developed a following for its range of 6700 nautical miles, as well as its roomy cabin. "People love the reliability. People love the cabin size," an aircraft purchasing consultant, Ken Murray of Waypoint Partners in Coral Springs, Fla., said. The Global Express sells for about \$50 million, but some people have paid a premium on top of that to get a plane right away. Its maximum takeoff weight is 98,000 pounds, also narrowly below the Teterboro limit. Owners of the Global Express XRS reportedly include Oprah Winfrey, Steven Spielberg, and William Gates III.

Now, Gulfstream has upped the ante by extending the range, by offering a cabin height of 6 feet, 3 inches, and by making space for up to 18 passengers.

"They're kind of leapfrogging Bombardier a little bit," an aerospace analyst, Raymond Jaworowski of Forecast International in Newton, Conn., said.

Some of the features planned for the new Gulfstream have raised eyebrows in the aviation community. The plane is to offer 28-inch wide "panoramic" windows, which Gulfstream says are the largest in any civil aircraft and 16% larger than those on the company's current top-of-the-line planes.

Mr. Nance, a safety consultant, noted that the cruising altitude used to achieve the G650's long range is 51,000 feet, the same as other long-range business jets but several thousand feet higher than most commercial jets. The supersonic Concorde, designed to fly all the way up to 60,000 feet, had smaller than normal windows in part because of worries about the danger of a window blowing out at such heights, he said.

"This is a very valid concern," Mr. Nance said, referring to the large windows and high altitude operation. "You're really hanging it out....If you're exposed to ambient pressure, your blood is going to boil and you're probably going to die."

Asked about the safety of the unusually large windows, a spokesman for Gulfstream, Robert Bagnier, said plans for the plane have been shared with the Federal Aviation Administration. "They are fully aware of what we are doing," he said. "It is not an issue."

New Gulfstreams also have a feature that causes the plane to descend automatically to a safe altitude if pressurization is lost and the pilots do not take immediate action.

Mr. Baugnier said the new Rolls Royce engines being designed for the G650 will improve fuel economy by 10% and emit less smoke and other pollutants. However, the impact of the improvements on the environment is less clear. High-altitude operation reduces drag on the aircraft, but some studies suggest high-level emissions cause more global warming than those released nearer to the ground.

While some may consider the expenditure of \$60 million or more on a private jet to be per se evidence of a faulty thought process, one of the selling points of the new plane is that passengers will actually think more clearly on board a G650 than on one of its predecessors or a commercial aircraft. At top altitude, the cabin will be pressurized to the equivalent of 4,850 feet, avoiding the mental fog and sluggishness that can be experienced on other high-flying planes, which keep pressure at the equivalent of about 8,000 feet.

There is no prototype for the G650, so the orders said to be rushing in today for the new status symbol are something of a shot in the dark. "There are some impressive specifications for this aircraft. If it comes to pass, that'll be great," Mr. Murray said.

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