

Solar-powered plane set for flight across America with visits to Phoenix, Dallas, NYC

TERENCE CHEA, Associated Press



MOUNTAIN VIEW, Calif. (AP) -- A solar-powered plane that has wowed aviation fans in Europe is set to travel across the United States with stops in Phoenix, Dallas, Washington, D.C., and New York, organizers of the trip announced Thursday.

The plane, Solar Impulse, is expected to be ready to leave from NASA Ames Research Center in Mountain View, Calif. on May 1, although the actual departure will depend on the weather, the plane's Swiss creators said at a news conference at the NASA center.

Solar Impulse, considered the world's most advanced solar-powered plane, will stop for seven to 10 days at major airports in each city, so the pilots can display and discuss the aircraft with reporters, students, engineers and aviation fans. It plans to reach New York's Kennedy Airport in early July - without using a drop of fuel, its creators said.

Between Dallas and Washington, D.C., the plane will also stop at one of three other cities: Atlanta, Nashville or St. Louis, said André Borschberg, Solar Impulse's co-founder, pilot and CEO. Each leg of the flight will run 20 to 25 hours.

"We want to inspire the young generation to become pioneers, to help them find and develop their passion," Borschberg said.

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

The Solar Impulse is powered by about 12,000 photovoltaic cells that cover massive wings and charge its batteries, allowing it to fly day and night without jet fuel. It has the wing span of a commercial airplane but the weight of the average family car, making it vulnerable to bad weather.

Its creators say the Solar Impulse is designed to showcase the potential of solar power and will never replace fuel-powered commercial flights. The delicate, single-seat plane cruises around 40 miles per hour and can't fly through clouds.

"The more you fly the more energy you have stored in the batteries, so it's absolutely fabulous to imagine all the possibilities the people can have with these technologies in their daily lives," said Bertrand Piccard, Solar Impulse co-founder and chairman.

In 2010, the solar plane flew non-stop for 26 hours to demonstrate that the aircraft could soak up enough sunlight to keep it airborne through the night. A year later, it went on its first international flight to Belgium and France.

Last year, the Solar Impulse made its first transcontinental voyage, traveling 1,550 miles from Madrid to the Moroccan capital Rabat in 20 hours.

Before its coast-to-coast American trip, the Solar Impulse will take test flights around the San Francisco Bay Area in April, officials said.

Piccard and Borschberg are planning an around-the-world flight in an improved version of the plane in 2015.

Piccard comes from a line of adventurers. His late father, Jacques, was an oceanographer and engineer who plunged deeper into the ocean than any other person. His grandfather Auguste, also an engineer, was the first man to take a balloon into the stratosphere.

Bertrand Piccard and Brian Jones made history in 1999 when they became the first people to circle the globe in a hot air balloon, flying 25,000 miles nonstop for 20 days.

Source URL (retrieved on 08/30/2014 - 5:49pm):

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