



The modular Clip-Air concept, by which capsules would be transported by a fixed-wing aircraft. Courtesy the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL).

Future of flight: From the return of supersonic travel to pods that clip onto planes

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Fasten your seatbelt: you're about to embark on the flight of the future. This high-tech journey – departing in the 2060s – starts at Abu Dhabi's central rail station, where you board a train that whisks you to the airport at 200 miles per hour.

Above you, at 60,000 feet, a supersonic jet lets out its trademark "boom" as it accelerates towards its top speed of 2,335 kilometres per hour on a three-hour \$100 flight to London. On the airfield a "hypersonic" plane is about to embark on a longer journey to San Francisco, in which it will soar 80km above Earth for a journey that will take just 90 minutes.

Your train grinds to a halt at the airport. But instead of disembarking, your capsule-like carriage is automatically "clipped" – along with two separate pods, one holding passengers from Dubai, the other cargo – onto an awaiting fixed-wing aircraft. Your "train" is now a plane and you're ready for take-off – all without leaving your seat or, indeed, queuing at passport control.

It sounds like a flight of fancy. But in 2016 all these aviation technologies are being explored or even developed – pointing to radically different travel experiences in the decades to come.

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Just ask Blake Scholl, a United States aviation entrepreneur and pilot. He says: "I want to live in a world where we can get anywhere on the planet in five hours – for \$100."

It's an ambitious aim, but Scholl is founder of Boom Technology, in Denver, which plans to reintroduce supersonic passenger travel within a decade. A former Amazon executive who created mobile technology start-up Kima Labs, later acquired by Groupon, this year unveiled the design of a 40-seat plane that would fly up to 2,335kph, travelling from New York to London in three-and-a-half hours. A trip from Abu Dhabi to the UK capital would be even shorter.

"It's going to change the way we experience the world," he says.

Aside from the business market, the aviation entrepreneur sees supersonic flights opening up leisure travel – cutting in half the 14-hour flight between Abu Dhabi and Sydney, for example. "You come into work on a Monday morning and people [ask], 'What did you do over the weekend?'," says Scholl. "Imagine if you could say 'I went to the opera in Sydney'."

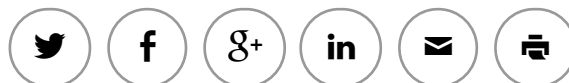
Richard Branson's Virgin empire has already taken options to buy 10 Boom jets, with a European carrier having reserved another 15. And Scholl says the Arabian Gulf is likely to be "one of the very first markets" where Boom's supersonic jets will fly.

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Two of the Gulf's biggest airlines have expressed interest in supersonic jets. Akbar Al Baker, chief executive of Qatar Airways, said in April that supersonic travel was "hugely viable" due to technology having moved on after the "fuel guzzling" engines used by Concorde.

"In 10 years' time, there will be a very high probability of Boeing and Airbus launching something similar," he told the Dubai Eye radio station. Dubai's Emirates airline once dismissed supersonic travel as too expensive and damaging to the environment. But Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum, chairman and chief executive of Emirates Airline and Group, told the radio station the same month that he hoped supersonic travel would one day once more be possible.

And the UAE also has an interest in faster air travel through Abu Dhabi's Aabar Investments, which has a 37.8 per cent stake in Virgin Galactic. While Branson's pioneering company is initially looking at space tourism, it has said it could also make passenger jets for long-haul travel above the Earth's atmosphere. Such technology would reportedly allow passengers to travel from London to Sydney in just two-and-a-half hours.



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