What's the Deal By Daniel Lesser

Daniel Lesser, president and CEO, LW Hospitality Advisors, New York City

A supersonic threat to the lodging industry

(The views and opinions expressed in this blog are strictly those of the author.)

Supersonic transport (SST) is an aircraft designed to transport passengers at velocities greater than the speed of sound, or 741 mph. In the early 1960s, Boeing had plans to develop the 2707 SST that were canceled due in part to political, economic, and environmental factors in the United States.

Also during the early 1960s, Aérospatiale-BAC Concorde (Concorde), a joint venture between Great Britain and France, developed, manufactured and placed in service a SST commercial passenger jet that had a maximum speed of Mach 2.04, or more than twice the speed of sound. Concorde, which operated a fleet of 14 aircraft over 27 years beginning in 1976, was one of only two SSTs to have operated commercially; the other was the Tupolev Tu-144, created by the former Soviet Union, which was only in service for a very short period of time.

A British Airways Concorde takes off in 2000. / Getty Images

Concorde luxuriously flew passengers willing to pay large sums to cross the Atlantic in 3.5 hours, or less than half the time of any other jetliner flying those routes even today. Development of the government-subsidized Concorde encountered dramatic delays and cost overruns, resulting in a venture that was not economically feasible. Concorde's viability was further dampened by U.S. government prevention of sonic boom disturbance over populated areas, limiting use of the aircraft to ocean crossings. The only fatal crash of Concorde in July 2000,

coupled with the general downturn in the commercial aviation industry after the September 11 attacks in 2001, led to retirement of the aircraft in 2003.

A new dawn in supersonic flight now appears to be on the horizon as technologies have advanced to reduce fuel consumption, energy prices look to remain low for the foreseeable future and aircraft design makes sonic booms largely a thing of the past. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), an independent agency of the executive branch of the U.S. federal government responsible for the civilian space program, as well as aeronautics and aerospace research, is collaborating with Lockheed Martin to create a commercially viable supersonic aircraft. The intent is to operate SST at reduced noise levels equivalent to those of automobiles, thereby eliminating current U.S. regulations that prevent supersonic flight over land.

Meanwhile, commercial ventures such as Boom Technology, Spike Aerospace and Aerion are moving ahead with their own plans to create SSTs that leverage advances in aerodynamics, materials and propulsion to achieve efficient supersonic flight. If development goes as planned, SSTs could start carrying passengers over water early in the next decade at airfares equivalent to subsonic business class service. Since an SST flight from NYC to London is anticipated to take three hours, travelers will be able to arrive to attend a set of meetings, have dinner, and be home in time to tuck their children into bed, thus in some instances, eliminating the need for an overnight hotel stay.

Last summer, the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee passed the Lee/Gardner Amendment to the FAA Reauthorization Act that will enable the development, testing, manufacturing and operation of civil supersonic aircraft over the U.S. mainland, in accordance with a sonic boom noise standard that is “economically reasonable and technologically practicable.” Although solidifying changes in governmental regulations may take several years to complete, I believe it safe to assume not if, but when the U.S. will allow SST transcontinental service. While the economic benefits of civil supersonic aviation over land will be enormous, the reintroduction of SST will surely reduce the need for transient hotel accommodations, resulting in a negative impact for the lodging industry.

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