



COLUMNIST
Air Travel

Flying cars are coming! Here's how they could change the way you travel.

Christopher Elliott
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If you'd told me a few weeks ago that flying cars will change the way we travel, I probably would have laughed at you.

But when Elon Musk hinted there might be a flying Tesla soon, the internet started buzzing with flying-car news. And now people are talking.

“There's absolutely a sense that the time has come,” said aviation industry investment banker Joey Smith at Cassel Salpeter & Co. “Numerous well-funded companies are racing to build a viable production vehicle, and they could take to the skies as early as next year.”

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What's more, attitudes toward Advanced Air Mobility (AAM) – that's a fancy term for flying cars and other personal flying vehicles – have shifted.

A new study suggests Americans, and particularly younger urban consumers, are warming to the idea of flying to their next destination. Even so, the definition of a flying car is a little hard to pin down. I'll explain in a minute.

Don't expect to open your apartment window and see a scene out of a sci-fi movie like "Minority Report" anytime soon. (You know, lanes of flying vehicles lining the sky.) It'll be a slow rollout, but it has the potential to change the way we travel like we haven't seen since the introduction of the jet engine.

What kind of flying vehicles are out there?

Personal flying vehicles defy simple classification, which may be part of their allure. There are STOLs and VTOLs, quadcopters, octocopters and hexacopters. Some are electric, some are gas-powered.

Don't be confused by all the acronyms. I think it's OK to just call them flying cars.

Right now, the ones generating the most noise are electric vertical takeoff and landing vehicles (eVTOLs). These aircraft take off and land like a helicopter. For example, Joby's air taxi service in Manhattan plans to use its eVTOL, which looks like an oversized drone, to shuttle passengers from New York to John F. Kennedy International Airport next year.

My categorization is a little unconventional, but here's how I see it: There are really just two types of flying cars. The first are cars that can drive on the road and fly, just like the ones in "Back to the Future."

One of the most high-profile of these is the Model A being developed by Alef Aeronautics. It's an eVTOL that looks like a sports car. But once it takes off, the passenger cabin pivots and the vehicle flies sideways, which looks a little jarring but very cool.

The second type of flying vehicle doesn't even bother with the road. For example, the Lilium Jet is a fixed-wing aircraft *and* an eVTOL. But you won't see it on the highway unless it's making an emergency landing – so technically, it's not a flying car.

Like I said, these flying vehicles aren't easy to categorize. And it hasn't really mattered until now because you could find them only in aviation magazines and science fiction movies. But now there are serious discussions about flying cars, and developers have started taking orders. The future is almost here.

Flying cars aren't cleared for takeoff – yet

Don't get *too* excited. A few things still have to be worked out, experts say. For example, eVTOL manufacturers have struggled with several challenges. It's not just how to design lightweight aircraft made from the right composite materials and with adequate battery life. It's also piloting the flying car. Issues such as autonomous flight capability and pilot training have proven to be big barriers.

There are also regulatory roadblocks. The Federal Aviation Administration, which has oversight of these new vehicles, has adopted a "crawl-walk-run" approach. And it's still in "crawl" mode. Last year, it laid down some rules for flying cars. Among them: They have to use existing heliports and they must have a human pilot. But there are no special traffic lanes in the sky for these vehicles yet.

The U.K. is also preparing for flying cars. In March, the government said it envisioned eVTOLs taking to the skies within four years.

Observers are skeptical of the proposed timeline. Charles Leocha, president of the consumer group Travelers United, has worked on regulations for low-level unmanned aerial vehicles for the last decade. He said the wheels are turning slowly.

“The FAA is at least a decade away from allowing or approving any kind of flying car,” he said.

All of that has made people reluctant to order a flying car – if they can afford one. Most vehicles can cost \$150,000 to as much as \$10 million.

"Prospective buyers are likely to hold off until regulatory barriers are dismantled," said Francesco Ceroni, a mobility expert at the design firm Buro Happold.

Where to find personal flying vehicles now

If you want to see a flying vehicle for yourself, here's where to find them (outside of the movie theater):

- Lift Aircraft, which manufactures a single-seat eVTOL called Hexa, is offering test flights on its single-seat Hexa this spring. It's scheduled to be in Lakeland Linder International Airport in Florida in April and Austin in May.
- Early next year, you'll be able to hail an air taxi from Abu Dhabi and Dubai on a four-passenger Midnight aircraft. The eVTOL, operated by UAE-based Falcon Aviation, will cover the 81-mile trip in just 30 minutes. By road, the drive can take a few hours in traffic.
- There's even a flying car driving school. Netherlands auto manufacturer PAL-V will show you the ins and outs of flying a car. They even have a flying car showroom in Munich where you can buy your own gyroplane/car combination. (It'll cost you about \$550,000.)

Bottom line: Flying cars remain rare. But change is on the horizon.

How flying cars could change the way we travel

High prices and continued doubts about the viability of zipping around town like George Jetson haven't stopped people from thinking about the

future. Experts seem to agree that safe VTOLs with FAA approval could change travel forever.

"It would reduce congestion by removing some traffic on the road and create a new aviation sector, with new jobs," said Raj Rajkumar, professor of computer engineering at Carnegie Mellon University.

Flying cars could dramatically cut the drive time between destinations typically served by short-haul commercial flights. So instead of catching a shuttle flight from Washington to New York, you'd just fly there in your own car in a fraction of the time it used to take to drive.

But that's just the beginning. As these vehicles become faster and more affordable, they hold the promise of competing with commercial aviation. Imagine flying your family car from the suburbs of an East Coast city to Florida for your next vacation in less time than it would take you to go to the airport, get through security, wait for your departure, fly, land, collect your luggage and rent an earthbound car?

The thought of ditching airlines, with their awful customer service and addictive loyalty programs, may be the greatest promise of the AAV revolution.

If you'd asked me a few weeks ago if such a future was possible, I would have been very skeptical. Now, I'm just a little skeptical.

This is the second of a two-part series on the future of air travel.

Christopher Elliott is an author, consumer advocate, and journalist. He founded Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps solve consumer problems. He publishes Elliott Confidential, a travel newsletter, and the Elliott Report, a news site about customer service. If you need help with a consumer problem, you can reach him here or email him at chris@elliott.org.