

THE INTERNATIONAL AIR SHOW AT LE BOURGET

Facts and figures

One hundred years after its inception, the International Air Show at Le Bourget is still the major showcase for the global aerospace industry. The event is organised by PLBpe, a subsidiary of GIFAS (Groupement des Industries Françaises Aéronautiques et Spatiales), the French aerospace industries association.

The first Paris Air Show took place at the Grand Palais in 1908, as part of a motor show. At that time, less than five years after the Wright brothers' first flight, aviation was merely a fad, known to the public mainly through the exploits of "those magnificent men in their flying machines", and not yet the expression of high technology and strategic importance that it was to become, as it acquired industrial and political significance over time.

In fact, that first exhibition in Paris demonstrated quite clearly that those "magnificent men" already had a clear vision of the potential offered by the new flying machine, with all its complex industrial, organisational and legal aspects. Today, air shows are no longer just a unique opportunity to display the most recent prototypes, the most advanced systems and the latest technology to the experts; they now also play a key role as events where global industry representatives converge to network with each other and their institutional partners. And of course, they also provide exciting entertainment for hundreds of thousands of enthusiasts. In 40 years, the number of countries participating has trebled, from 14 in 1969 to 42 in 2007.

Let's take a look at some facts and figures that highlight the importance of the event today: at the last show, the static display covered an area of 192,000 square metres, while the indoor stands, chalets, corporate areas and restaurants covered 128,000 square metres. Between 6,000 and 10,000 people were involved in organising the event, which included 4,000 telephone lines and 30 kilometres of fibre optic cable, as well as temporary structures covering an area of 73,000 square metres (equivalent to 280 tennis courts). At the 2007 air show, there were 143 aircraft, nearly 2,000 exhibitors from 42 countries, 400,000 visitors, 150 official delegations and around 3,500 journalists from around the world.

This year, the event will be celebrating its centenary: it is 100 years since pioneering manufacturers and aviators such as Louis Blériot, Louis Charles Breguet and Gabriel Voisin had the idea of giving an international commercial dimension to aviation, which until then had been considered merely a sport. That vision produced results that were unimaginable at the time, ushering in a century of uninterrupted progress and innovation in the aeronautics field. To celebrate this anniversary, the French aerobatic team Patrouille de France will return to Le Bourget after an absence of more than 30 years, while the Air and Space Museum will be displaying around 30 vintage aircraft from the period 1909 to 1960. These will include the pioneering Blériot XI, the first aeroplane to cross the Channel; a Fokker DR1 from the first world war; a Junkers JU 52 and a B-17 Flying Fortress from the second world war; and a DH 100 Vampire and Dassault Mirage III F86 from the 1950s and 1960s.

Finmeccanica plays a leading role in the global aerospace and defence industry, and participates in some of the sector's biggest international programmes through its group companies and well-established alliances with European and USA partners. A leader in the design and manufacture of helicopters, defence and security electronics, civil and military aircraft, aerostructures, satellites, space infrastructure and defence systems, Finmeccanica is Italy's leading high-tech company. It also boasts significant manufacturing assets and skills in the transport and energy sectors; it is listed on the Milan stock market and operates via a number of group companies and joint ventures. It has over 73,000 employees, with more than 12,600 working in the USA, about 10,100 in the UK and over 3,600 in France. As part of its drive to maintain and build on its technological excellence, Finmeccanica spends 12% of its revenues on Research and Development.

Highlights of the last 100 years

After the air show of 1909 – the year in which the Frenchman Louis Blériot crossed the Channel in his monoplane – only the outbreak of the Great War interrupted the annual event. It resumed in 1919 with an increased number of companies and new models, which were presented to an audience that was growing ever more numerous and interested. The new enthusiasts were not only military personnel, who well understood the importance of the new machine after the recent conflict, but also entrepreneurs keen to develop air travel for commercial purposes.

The air show of 1924 saw the participation of the first overseas exhibitors, from Germany and the UK, where more than in other European countries, air transport networks that were highly advanced for their time had been developed. From then on, the event was held every two years, and was interrupted only by the outbreak of the second world war.

In 1927, after his non-stop transatlantic flight, Charles Lindbergh landed at the Le Bourget airfield, giving this airport international prominence. The next year, Italy took part in the air show with a solid presence for the first time. At the Grand Palais the country showcased its great S.55 seaplane, built by SIAI (a Lombardy-based company that is now part of AerMacchi), which was subsequently used for Italo Balbo's Atlantic flights but which was originally designed as a passenger transport aircraft and bomber. Meanwhile, Macchi exhibited its M.67 racing seaplane, which shortly afterwards competed for the Schneider Trophy in the UK, with unfortunate results. The next year saw SIAI exhibit again with its three-engined passenger transport seaplane, the S.66. At that time, the multi-engined seaplane design was seen as the safest for long-haul passenger flights.

In 1934, Italy took part in the air show with the Macchi MC.72, fresh from its world speed record of over 729 km/h, and with the biplane fighter Fiat CR.32, which was used in the Spanish Civil War two years later. In 1936 Italy withdrew from the event in protest against the sanctions imposed by the League of Nations for its imperialist policy in east Africa.

In 1946, following the suspension of the event due to the second world war, the Paris Air Show, which had now grown to such an extent that it could not be held in an exhibition hall, transferred to a more suitable venue. Although the display was still held at the Grand Palais (with the larger aircraft outside at Les Invalides), the flight demonstrations took place at Orly Airport.

But it wasn't until 1951 that the air show found its definitive home. At that time, Le Bourget was Paris's main airport, a model for the world's commercial aviation, which was slowly laying the foundations for the rapid development that in the 1960s would see it become the mechanism for the 20th century's mass transport revolution. After the exploits of the 1930s, Italian industry, under the auspices of the Italian Association of Aeronautics Industries, took part in the air shows of the post-war period from 1949 onwards, despite its struggling economy. The Fiat G.46 and the Piaggio P.136 – some of the first competitive products to emerge from Italian post-war industry – featured in the first air shows of that period.

In 1957, AERFER (then part of Aeritalia, now Alenia Aeronautica) unveiled its light fighter plane, the Sagittario II. In the same year, Italy's National Aerobatic Team, the Cavallino Rampante, gave its first display in the F-86 fighter planes. In 1959, Italian industry celebrated the 50th anniversary of the first powered flight of an Italian aircraft, the Faccioli, at the Paris Air Show. Also on display were the Agusta AZ.8, a four-engined regional transport aircraft, as well as the Piaggio P.166. The AerMacchi MB.326, a trainer jet, 800 of which were produced subsequently, also exhibited its first flight at the show.

But the air show was certainly not then what it is now – the world's leading aviation event. It was only in 1969 that Le Bourget was recognised as an air show of real international merit, thanks to the participation of 14 countries, each vying with each other to announce their latest flood of orders, and to new prototypes using the latest technology of the time, such as Concorde and the B747.

The year 1973 saw the debut of Airbus Industries with its A300, the first example of an enormous European success that few could ever have dreamed of, but it was also the year of rivalry between

Concorde and its Russian competitor, the Tupolev Tu-144, which ended with the tragic crash of the Soviet airliner. That same year at Le Bourget, a “flying work of art” was exhibited, namely the Braniff DC-8, painted by US artist Alexander Calder.

By 1975, Orly had long taken over the role as Paris’s main airport, and the future Charles de Gaulle Airport was already at the design stage. Le Bourget, which had been relegated to handling only executive traffic, consolidated its fame as an airport of historic value for global aviation with the creation of the great Air and Space Museum, a permanent reminder of the sector’s glorious heritage. In the same year, the number of countries exhibiting at the air show rose to 20.

In that period, Italian industry, which had by now regained its competitiveness, took part in the show, exhibiting the G.222 in flight (1977) and other successful designs such as Aermacchi trainer aircraft and Agusta helicopters. At that time, restrictions on flight demonstrations were less stringent. Italy’s national aerobatic team was the resident guest of the air show and paraded in front of tens of thousands of spectators with the Patrouille De France aerobatic team.

In the 1980s the air show consolidated its role as the leading aerospace exhibition in the world. In 1983, NASA displayed its Space Shuttle, transported on the back of a B747, at the event, as part of a promotional tour of Europe. In 1989, the Soviet Union exhibited for the first time the Antonov An-225, still the world’s largest aircraft, which was created to transport the planned Soviet shuttle (this never came to fruition) and is now used to carry oversized cargoes.

In 1991, the stars of the air show were the aircraft and weapons systems deployed in the Gulf War, including the A-10 fighter-bomber, known as the “tank killer”, the Jaguar aircraft and the Patriot missile. The American A117 stealth bomber was also exhibited for the first time. In 1995 a record number of countries – 41 – took part in Le Bourget, with many aircraft exhibited for the first time, including the American B2 bomber, the Boeing 777 passenger aircraft and the X-31 aircraft.

In 1997, more new records were set, with 1,860 exhibitors from 46 countries and around 230 aircraft. Two years later, UAVs took centre stage at the air show, and the static display area was extended to 192,000 square metres. The year 2003 marked the centenary of aviation and the 50th anniversary of the Paris international air show at Le Bourget.

The 2005 edition of the air show saw the presentation of the “giant of the skies”, the Airbus A380, and a new record number of exhibitors (1,900) and spectators (around 500,000 visitors over seven days). In 2007, the event for the first time provided a B2B area, where around 6,000 business meetings were held.