

Run on air

Luxury balloons soar above high fuel costs

"I used to think that I was cool
Running around on fossil fuel
Until I saw what I was doing
Was driving down the road to ruin."

James Taylor

Like it or not, oil and the products that go with it are quickly running out. It really depends on who you choose to believe. Some will say we have at least 50 years of oil and natural gas left to run our cars, fuel our furnaces and gas up our supersonic jets.

Others say the end is at hand. Our world of fossil fuel is dissolving at the tune of 47 percent a year in foreign imports, which is due to increase as our yearly domestic supply dwindles.

By KEVIN HARDEN
Of the Emerald

It doesn't matter who you choose to believe, the end result is the same: the convertible Chevy is a thing of the past. And those huge jet airliners that seem to gulp more than their fair share of the fuel are bound to follow close behind.

But that doesn't mean air travelers will have to forfeit their mode of transportation. People more than 30 years ago had no trouble finding ways to float along among the clouds. In fact, if—as it now looks—the change in our fuel consumption will eventually change our lifestyle, we may as well go back to the basics in air travel, as well as food, clothing and homes.

Luxury travel by air didn't start at Kitty Hawk. It happened much earlier. Fifty years before the Wright Brothers made their flight into history Frenchman Henri Gifford made the first directed flight in a propeller-equipped hydrogen balloon.

From there it was one flight after another until the German father of the modern Airship, Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin, built

the first rigid-type airship in 1894. Zeppelin went on to build several more airships until his triumph emerged, the airship that all others are judged by: the Hindenburg.

But, Zeppelin enthusiasts who were counting their eggs before they hatched lost hope of seeing giant Airships filling the skies, floating noiselessly over the oceans and hovering over cities, when the Hindenburg burst into flames in 1937 and killed 35 people while mooring at Lakehurst, N.J.

Airships' end seemed in sight. Until today.

The present energy situation has awakened a renewed interest in the huge cigar-shaped floating hotels. Ecologists interested in air travel sans large fuel consumption are now looking into airships.

Not hot-air balloons or blimps, but the huge rigid construction of fabric over metal-frame airships. By its very definition, an airship is more economical and ecological than a DC-10. It needs no fuel to get off the ground and stay there, and the helium inside its huge frame gives the airship buoyancy. Fuel is needed only to drive the engines at approximately 100 miles per hour.

As far back as 1957 Edwin Kirschner took Pres. Dwight Eisenhower's "Open Sky" policy seriously and wrote a small book about the "Zeppelin in the Atomic Age."

Airships, Kirschner argued, could be built for about what it costs to build an airliner, and could be used for both commercial and governmental use as cargo carriers and floating command posts for battle.

Kirschner's idea for an airship is a huge cigar-shaped luxury liner in the sky, powered by a small nuclear reactor and a huge electric-driven propeller at the tail. His airship could hold up to 1,000 passengers and tons of cargo, with retractable pontoons for landing on water. It would be the Queen Mary of the sky.

A more recent work by Henry Ambers in 1970 argues nearly the same point, but stresses that the airship of the future will



Graphic by Jim Payne

need to be larger and more durable than before. The age of the "luxury" 747 airliner is rapidly coming to an end, Ambers says, and it is about time airships rule the skies once more.

Ruling the sky is one thing. Becoming feasible is another. Both Kirschner and Ambers, as well as other writers who promote airships for future air transportation, recognize that before a modern dirigible can be launched its economic barrier of construction and maintenance must be overcome.

A Boston University study headed by Francis Morse five years ago estimated that a more conventional airship for cargo and

travel use could be built for \$50 million, with copies of the prototype built for \$25 million apiece—or the cost of one Boeing 747.

Building a modern Zeppelin won't get off the ground, most enthusiasts conclude, until someone with lots of money becomes interested. Four years ago the Navy began looking at airships as potential airborne aircraft carriers, missile launchers and command posts.

Even the U.S. Forest Service had research going on airship use in 1974. But since then the speculation has been in limbo. And Zeppelin enthusiasts wait for the day when airships once more float and hover their way across the skies.



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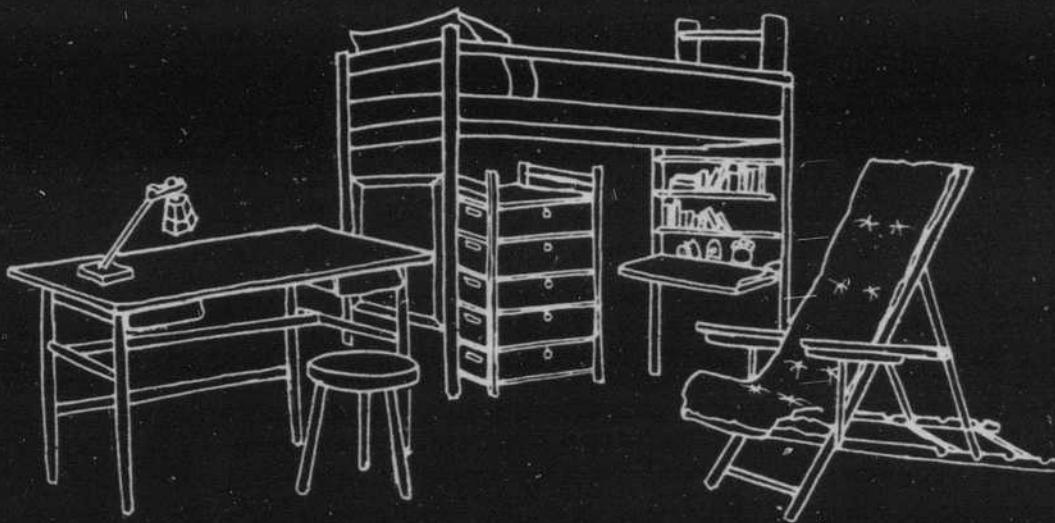
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