

Qatar Airlines to Introduce Jets Fuelled by Natural Gas



It's no secret that our reliance on fossil fuels must come to an end, and the sooner the better. Prices at the pumps continue to push up against record highs, and climate change issues plague many parts of the world. Those who care about environmental sustainability have been limiting their airplane travel in recent years, as reports have come out deeming that to be the method of travel with the largest carbon footprint. But if a new approach soon coming to market proves effective, there may be an alternative.

Qatar Airways is opening up a brand new airport by the end of 2013, and among many flashy updates and comfortable amenities is the incredibly important addition of airplanes fueled by natural gas.

Qatar has had issues with oil for quite some time, as it doesn't have many natural oil deposits. But its supply of natural gas is sizable and has offered a real alternative. However it is much more difficult to ship unstable natural gas, so the airline has partnered with Royal Dutch/Shell on a plant that can transform gases into liquids. It's an innovative approach, but not a brand new one. In fact, South Africa has been making jet fuel and diesel from coal ever since the days when apartheid trade sanctions cut the country off from importing oil. And scientifically the process of turning coal or natural gas into liquid form is similar enough that it doesn't create any new problems. But while South Africa's coal-based fuel has an even higher carbon footprint than standard oil, the Qatar Airways team feels that is not the case with their natural gas fuels.

According to Akbar Al Baker, the CEO of Qatar Airways, their transformed natural gas is a large improvement over petroleum-based jet fuel. There is no sulfur involved, therefore no sulfur dioxide is being released into the environment to add to global

warming. And since the fuel sourced from natural gas provides more energy than the petroleum version, it takes less fuel to make the same trip. Less fuel used, and less weight in fuel required on the airplane means improved fuel economy.

It will still be a while before Qatar Airlines is able to implement this new fueling procedure across its fleet. Its ships consist of more than 100 aircrafts. A handful of those work with Rolls Royce engines, and the manufacturer has approved this new fuel. Rolls already had experience with this technique, as Britain's Royal Air Force fleet ran one of the earliest studies on South Africa's methods, which is why they may have been so quick to agree to the changes. But the majority of the aircraft run on General Electric engines, and GE does not have that experience. According to Rick Kennedy, a G.E. spokesperson who was queried on this issue, the company is ready to confirm the fuel's use in their vehicles. But they are still uncertain if the new fuel is as large a boon for the environment as Qatar's people suggest.

Other companies have been experimenting with alternative jet fuels, and early results suggest potentially stronger long-term options. Boeing, one of the most well respected airplane manufacturers in the world, is looking closely at bio-based fuels. They feel that jet fuel created from natural gas works much in the same manner as traditional fossil fuels, and the expensive processing reverses many of the benefits. While it may not be the best strategy internationally, it is clearly a great idea for Qatar, based on that region's particular needs. Yet considering the costly process and approval timeline, it will be quite a while before natural gas powers your car service to Logan Airport.

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