HISTORY OF PARIS AIR SHOW

News / Events / Festivals

The Paris Air Show, held at Le Bourget airport, is the world's oldest and largest aerospace exhibition.
How did it all start?

Where aerospace gets down to business

Le Bourget airport has hosted the Paris air show since 1953. For a week in June, aviation's kingmakers broker billion-dollar deals through the night. In daylight hours generals and presidents rub shoulders while aircraft of every stripe compete to pull the crowds.

Yet the airfield's most famous hour came on a Saturday night in 1927, when **Charles Lindbergh's** 33-hour solo Atlantic crossing ended there. Tens of thousands gathered to witness his arrival.

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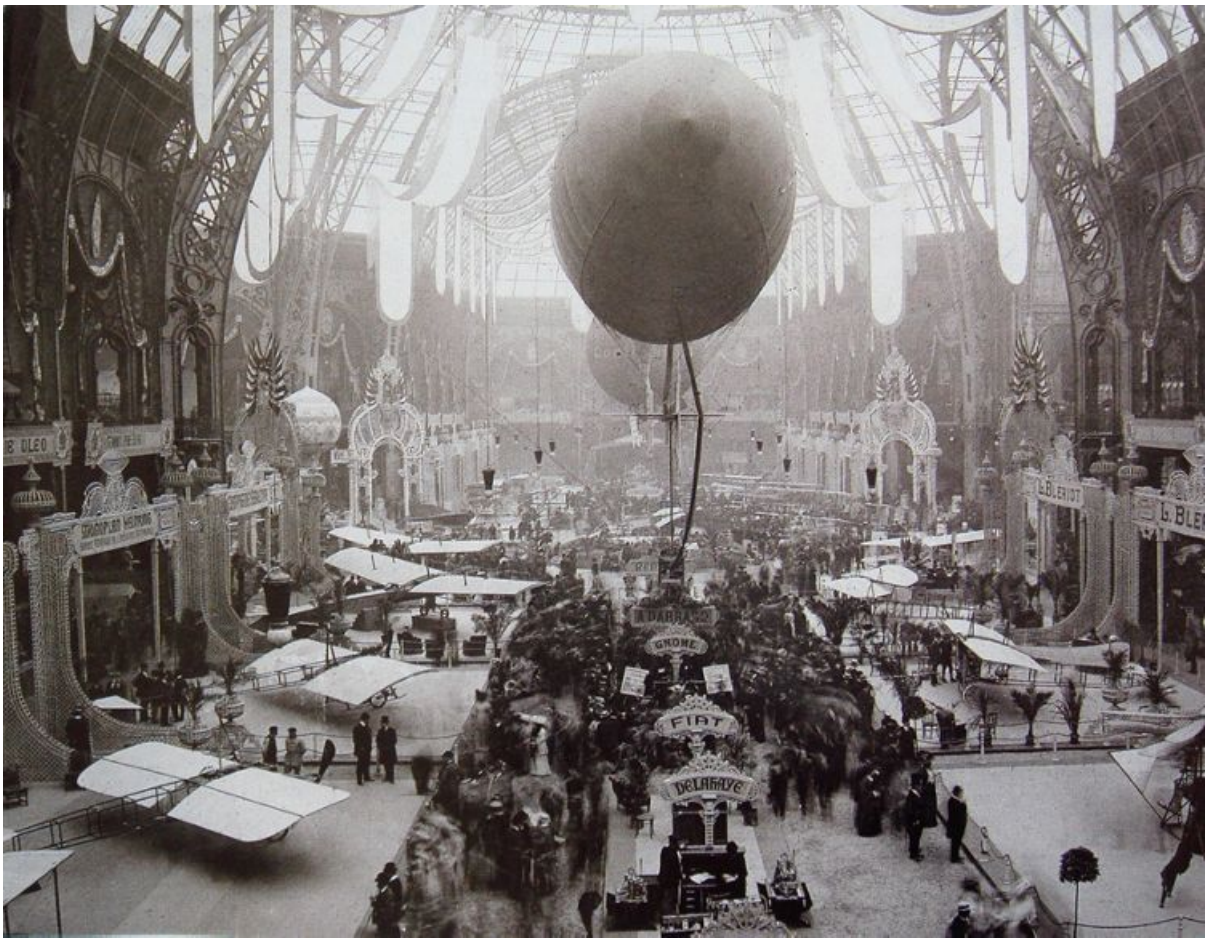
Lindbergh could never have predicted the unprecedented global response to his arrival in Paris. By that year, radio and telephones could transmit images and voices around the world. Motion pictures had just mastered the synchronisation of sound, allowing dramatic moments to be preserved in all their glory and distributed worldwide. For the first time all of civilisation could share as one the sights and sounds of an event. In this young aviator the new technology found its first superstar. A. Scott Berg in Lindbergh (1998)

From automobiles to aircraft

But two weeks before Lindbergh landed to be mobbed by ecstatic crowds, the legendary French biplane ***L'Oiseau Blanc*** (The White Bird) took off from the airfield on its own non-stop transatlantic attempt. With two First World War aces at the commands, it disappeared over the ocean and was never found.

Northwest of the city, Le Bourget started commercial operations in 1919 and was Paris' only airport until Orly was completed in 1932.Today it serves business aviation and is home to **France's Air and Space Museum**.

The Paris Air Show itself can trace its beginnings to 1908, when for the first time a section of the city's motor exhibition was dedicated to 'aerial locomotion'. The **wonder of heavier-than-air flight** , still in its infancy, was a huge draw and the public was in thrall to the heroes of the day: those magnificent men in their flying machines.



From the Grand Palais to Le Bourget

The following year the first dedicated air show was held at the city's **Grand Palais on the Champs Elysées**

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, attracting 380 exhibitors and over 100,000 visitors. There were a further four editions before the outbreak of World War I.

The show restarted in 1919, to be held every two years before being interrupted again by the Second World War. It reconvened in 1946 – no mean feat given the near-total wartime destruction of France's aeronautical industry – and since 1949 it has been held every odd year, with the **Farnborough International Air Show** occurring each even year in the UK.

Flying displays were initially held at Orly but in 1953 the show was relocated to Le Bourget for good. In 1969, **Concorde** and the Boeing 747 were exhibited in Paris for the first time. Gradually the show became a powerful rival to Farnborough.

Shows of strength

At the last Paris air show in 2015, Airbus Commercial Aircraft garnered 421 orders and commitments valued at $57 billion.

Today for that week in June Le Bourget becomes the **world's largest open-air showroom**. Everyone competes to create 'le Buzz'. Airlines queue up to present their newest aircraft and latest cabin innovations.

Lessors move from chalet to chalet to announce leasing deals and aircraft purchases. Small businesses have a global stage on which to showcase their expertise. Manufacturers occupy plenty of floor space too, inhabiting multi-storey pavilions that house everything from scale models and cabin mock-ups to fully-equipped flight simulators.

Airbus has of course been a regular exhibitor at Le Bourget, where the company has sealed some of the largest orders ever made in civil aviation. The company first saw the light of day at the air show.

On 29 May 1969 French transport minister Jean Chamant sat down with German economics minister Karl Schiller in a mock-up of the cabin of a new aircraft destined to reshape the aviation industry. The two politicians signed an agreement **officially launching the A300**, the world's first twin-engine wide body.

The aircraft was to be built by a French-German consortium which would also involve the British and the Dutch. The decision to give the A300 the go-ahead was the **formal starting point of the Airbus project**.

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Taking centre stage

Airbus' civilian and military aircraft regularly perform star turns at Le Bourget, their swooping flight displays a firm favourite with the enthusiasts who flood the showground when it finally opens to the public after four frantic days of deal-closing.

A proving ground for the most cutting-edge innovations from around the world, the show has also been a launch pad for many Airbus products. The **A380** made its debut there in 2005 and its flight displays broke all previous records for public attendance at the show – some 230,000 visitors over three days came to admire the aircraft. The A380 has been a firm favourite ever since, its flight display keenly awaited as one of the week's highlights.

The record set in 2013 for the number of exhibitors at the Paris air show was broken during its 51st edition in 2015, with 2,303 exhibitors from 48 countries present that year. From a business point of view, the 2015 show was exceptional for many aircraft manufacturers, with $150 billion of orders announced. Around 201,000 general public visitors attended.

In 2011 **Airbus Helicopters** unveiled its **X3** experimental high-speed compound helicopter at Le Bourget. Then in 2013 at the 50th Paris air show the youngest member of the Airbus family, the **A350 XWB**, performed a flypast just days after its maiden flight. Airbus revealed a demonstrator of its highly-anticipated **E-Fan** all-electric pilot training two-seater during that edition too.

The real item performed at the 2015 show, 12 months after its first flight and just weeks before its **historic crossing of the Channel**. True to Airbus tradition, the E-Fan had stepped into the shoes of the pioneers who put Le Bourget on the map long before anyone had ever put pen to paper to sign a megadeal.

Marc Stephens

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