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View From Paris: 65,000 Airplanes Tracked Globally

Frenchman's Hobby Grows Into Authoritative Registry; The Chopped-Up Tupolev

By DANIEL MICHAELS April 30, 2007; Page A1

PARIS -- Nearly 30,000 commercial airliners fly around the world, and Alexandre Avrane tracks each of them.



Alexandre Avrane

Through a telescope in his penthouse apartment, Mr. Avrane can spot planes miles beyond Paris. But his real intelligence lies in a global network of airplane fanatics from Tehran to Lima to Shanghai.

Máximo J. Gainza, a fellow enthusiast from Buenos Aires, in February emailed Mr. Avrane an interesting nugget: A Boeing 727 that had been in the fleet of Bolivian flag carrier Lloyd Aéreo Boliviano for 37 years was still flying, Mr. Gainza wrote, setting a record for the longest time served by a plane with a single airline.

"It's like tracking missing sheep for a global shepherd," says Mr. Gainza, a 22-year-old travel agency manager who spends an afternoon a week checking out planes at the Argentine capital's downtown Jorge Newbery Airport.

Documenting the genealogy of planes started a decade ago as a hobby for Mr. Avrane, a 50-year-old former software manager for Oracle Corp. in France. Today, his AeroTransport Data Bank is a subscription-based online catalog, with detailed information on successive owners, operating history and unusual features of nearly 65,000 military and civilian jet and propeller planes -- including ones in the scrapheap -- serving the fascination of aviation fans around the world.

Vital Role

As aircraft play an increasingly vital role in shipping, humanitarian-aid transport and smuggling, Mr. Avrane's compendium is a valuable tool for others as well. Used-aircraft brokers, aid organizations, tour operators and even intelligence agencies, which Mr. Avrane declines to name, are among the 1,400 subscribers to the database.

CLICK TO SEE A PAGE FROM THE DATABASE



Information about planes has become such a valuable commodity that

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See the [AeroTransport Data Bank](#) page about one well-traveled Boeing 737.

"You don't learn about Russian aircraft being in Moscow -- it's by being in Kinshasa," and other isolated places where many of them fly, says Mr. Avrane, who runs ATDB from a corner of his glass-walled living room. He prefers to work at night, spending hours verifying tidbits emailed by his world-wide web of informants.

Mr. Avrane began photographing airliners around the world for fun in 1972, when jet travel was largely for the rich and airports opened up their observation decks to the public. By the time he was 25, thanks to family connections in the travel business, Mr. Avrane had traveled on a shoestring to Thailand, India and Australia to snap planes with his Nikon camera.

On the road, he would annotate a copy of JP Airline Fleets International, a 750-page annual publication first put out in the mid-1960s, which lists every commercial jetliner in the world. Based on what he saw and learned from other enthusiasts, Mr. Avrane would update entries in the book such as details on which airlines owned individual planes.

Over the years, he compiled separate lists of military aircraft.

Developing a particular penchant for forgotten planes, Mr. Avrane wrote a 1981 history of the Caravelle, a French jetliner from the 1950s that was notable for its triangular windows, which was published in Britain.

## Hobby Becomes a Business

Even when Mr. Avrane got a job in the computer business in 1982, he kept at his hobby by traveling, taking pictures of planes and updating lists of aircraft on an early Apple computer. As the Internet advanced, so did Mr. Avrane's idea of turning his hobby into the business that became ATDB.

At first, Mr. Avrane posted his lists for fun, and free of charge. Aviation enthusiasts discovered the site and started sending him information from around the world to flesh out missing data.

By 2001, ATDB had grown enough that when the Internet bubble burst and Mr. Avrane was laid off as director of technology at Oracle in France, he wasn't worried. Thanks to a pile of Oracle stock and options, "I can afford not to be paid," says Mr. Avrane, who devoted his full attention to ATDB and made it a paid site a year later.

Mr. Avrane hasn't needed to pay his contributors, either. Indeed, as word spread that the Frenchman was building up his database, the ranks of his informants swelled. The airline buffs provide information, and voluntarily point out outdated information and items that need to be corrected.

ATDB today holds more than 180,829 entries on 65,000 civilian and military transport planes. Any jet or propeller plane qualifies, as long as it holds at least 30 people. Mr. Avrane links the planes to more than 10,000 operators, ranging from major airlines to Antarctic Airways, the Saudi royal family and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Subscribers pay anywhere between about \$50 a year for access to limited data and about \$1,600 for a full one-year subscription. Mr. Avrane doesn't disclose revenue or profit figures for

the field of plane-cataloging is getting crowded. In addition to the AeroTransport Data Bank, or ATDB, there are at least three other global databases. So Mr. Avrane seeks his competitive advantage in remote corners of the world.

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Robert Domand

A Boeing 727, which spent 37 years in service for Bolivian flag carrier Lloyd Aéreo Boliviano.

ATDB.

For Mr. Gainza in Argentina, helping Mr. Avrane means putting a lifelong hobby to good use. The Buenos Aires travel manager is the son of an aviation journalist who flies World War II-vintage Soviet Yakovlev fighter planes.

Chatting with an aircraft mechanic in 2005, Mr. Gainza learned that a Boeing 737 parked at a Buenos Aires airport had completed 92,117 flights in 38 years, making it one of the 10 most-traveled 737s in the world. He quickly alerted Mr. Avrane.

A source in Germany recently emailed Mr. Avrane another tidbit: A 32-year-old Boeing 707, last flown by the government of Togo, had come out of storage near Bucharest to fly for the government of Mali.

### Getting Confirmation

Mr. Avrane doesn't take all the information at face value. When a source in Russia emailed a photograph of a Soviet-built Tupolev-154 jetliner being chopped up in Samara, southern Russia, Mr. Avrane turned to a Tupolev expert to get more details before posting the entry. The specialist confirmed the plane's serial number, based on traces of its paint.

In December, when a U.S. subscriber to ATDB emailed about a new carrier being established in Eritrea, in east Africa, Mr. Avrane hesitated to post the news. "It took a while to get a second confirmed sighting," he recalls.

For humanitarian organizations that often lease planes for aid flights, being able to rely on airtight information on ATDB is crucial, says Michel Schaffner, head of flight operations at the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva. "If a plane was on the Congolese registry for years, we can say it would be in less good condition than if it were on the Swiss registry," Mr. Schaffner says.

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