

## FANCY A LIFT?

Who's up for a ride in an autonomously piloted flying taxi? One of the contenders racing to bring them to market asked prospective passengers how likely they'd be to hop on board. **Paul Sillers** reports

**F**lying taxis will be commercially operational in the 2020s. Power density from batteries and fuel cells is improving, regulators are defining safety standards and air traffic control infrastructure, while dozens of manufacturers (both mainstream aircraft builders as well as startups) are busy flight-testing prototypes. Meanwhile, potential operators such as Uber are figuring out how to make flying taxis affordable and deciding where to locate 'vertiports'. But beyond resolving the technicalities of an urban aerial mobility (UAM) ecosystem lies a question: how keen will tomorrow's commuters be to give flying taxis a whirl?

A preliminary study on UAM public acceptance was recently published by Airbus UTM, a division of Airbus' Urban Air Mobility Unit, which surveyed 1,540 people from Los Angeles, Mexico City, New Zealand and Switzerland. The survey found that 67 per cent of respondents in Mexico City and 46 per cent of those in LA indicated that they are likely or very likely to use UAM. Furthermore, the 25-34 age group had the most positive initial reaction (55 per cent positive), compared to the 75-84 age group (15 per cent positive). Mexico City's propensity for flying taxis isn't too surprising, given the level of road congestion plus the fact that an on-demand helicopter service called Voom already exists in the densely populated capital, which may be generating familiarity with the concept of UAM.

Other responses elicited by the study show that 25 per cent of all males are very likely to use UAM, compared to 17 per cent of all female respondents. Locale is relevant, too: 25 per cent of all urban residents are very likely to use UAM, as against 16 per cent of all rural residents.

"Our aim is to bring the public's voice to the table to create an ecosystem that better prepares cities and city dwellers for autonomous and electric aerial vehicles in a way that takes into account their desires, hopes and fears," says Jessie Mooberry, Airbus UTM head of deployment. Airbus is developing a family of UAM vehicles, including the four-seater autonomous CityAirbus, the single-seater Vahana, which has already completed more than 50 test flights, and the Pop.Up

Next, a modular vehicle that can drive on roads as well as fly, designed in collaboration with Audi.

Competitor proponents of UAM are also actively reaching out for public buy-in. At January's Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Bell Helicopter revealed a full-scale hybrid-electric air taxi named Bell Nexus.

"As space at ground level becomes limited, we must solve transportation challenges in the vertical dimension –

that's where Bell's on-demand mobility vision takes hold," said Bell's CEO, Mitch Snyder. And at last year's CES, Volocopter, the Daimler- and Intel-backed maker of electrical vertical-take-off-and-landing (eVTOL) multicopters announced it had flown Intel's then CEO Brian Krzanich as the very first passenger in its eponymous vehicle. "Autonomous air taxis are coming," said Florian Reuter, CEO of Volocopter, echoing car magnate Henry Ford, who announced in 1940: "Mark my words: a combination airplane and motorcar is coming. You may smile, but it will come." ■

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**Who's gonna fly you home?**  
Volocopter envisions a network of ports for air taxis that use existing infrastructure

