

Lofty concept

## Firm has high hopes for new type of blimp

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MONTEBELLO - Tucked in a warehouse along the Rio Hondo, one of the world's few blimp companies is building a bulbous-looking, super-light flying cruise ship that officials say could revolutionize air travel.

Called the Aeroscraft, the ship would be capable of flying 3,000 miles at 110 mph, hovering in place, and lifting 3 to 4 tons of cargo.

"Nothing like this has been done before," said Edward Pevzner, business development manager at Worldwide Aeros Corp., the company working on the Aeroscraft.

"We're still thinking of all the different ways we could use it," he said.

Larger versions of the craft in the future could transport 60 tons and hold hundreds of people, he said.

Founded by Igor Pasternak, a flight specialist from the former Soviet Union, Worldwide Aeros claims to produce some of the world's most advanced blimps, building electronically-controlled ships that need only one pilot for operation. Blimp companies are so rare that, at any given time, there are only about 20 in the world, company officials said.

With hangars in San Bernardino and its headquarters in Montebello, Worldwide Aeros has permission from the Federal Aviation Administration to operate its Sky Dragon blimp and is working on getting a certificate for a new version of that blimp, according to FAA spokesman Ian Gregor.



Edward Pevzner, business development manager at Worldwide Aeros Corp., stands with a model of the company's latest prototype at their office in Montebello Tuesday August 26, 2008. (Staff photo by Keith Durlinger)

But the rigid Aeroscraft is an entirely new concept in flight.

About 73 percent of the Aeroscraft's weight would be supported by helium kept in a bulbous compartment at the top of the craft, which cuts in half the amount of power needed to keep the Aeroscraft airborne when compared to a conventional jet, Pevzner said.

The rest of the lift would come from the force of air moving against the Aeroscraft, like an airplane.

The ship could cruise, hover, or move straight up and down, he said.

The Aeroscraft's ability to self-adjust its buoyancy is what makes it unique, Pevzner said. Typically, blimps cannot carry much cargo because it is too difficult to adjust the amount of helium in the craft when the payload changes. But the Aeroscraft would be able to quickly adjust its buoyancy, sucking helium in and out of containers and using air as a ballast.

The idea for the ship - which is scheduled to be in operation in about two years - is causing a stir among technology buffs. Web sites about flight and technology are buzzing with comments from fans and skeptics.

"This is not a Blimp," wrote journalist Joshua Tompkins on the Web site popsci.com. "It's a sort of flying Queen Mary 2 that could change the way you think about air travel."

Research for the craft was funded by the U.S. government, which was looking for a way to transport cargo to areas without runways, according to statements from the company.

The company is now translating that research into a civilian use.

The Aeroscraft could be used by oil companies to transport equipment to remote regions, as a flying mansion for billionaires or for corporate travel to places without major airports.

Aeros Worldwide caught the eye of Rep. Grace Napolitano, D-Santa Fe Springs, who noticed the company had moved to her district about 10 months ago from the San Fernando Valley.

The company relocated to Montebello to be closer to suppliers and FAA offices, and because the new building had a warehouse large enough to hold 150-foot-long deflated blimps. Most of the aircraft frames are handmade at the facility.

"I'm very excited about the technology they're bringing out," Napolitano said. "The application for moving air cargo impressed me. We're always looking for things that are innovative and environmentally friendly."

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