

FUTURE OF...

FLYING

WITH SIR RICHARD BRANSON

How fast and high will we fly in the next few years? Intergalactic, underwater, time travel - just how far will we go?

How will mobility change in the future?

Technology will make travelling long distances both quicker and easier. We firmly believe space travel will enable people to fly from London to Sydney in just a few hours. In time we hope to travel way beyond our own planet at an affordable price.

How will most of us get around?

We are pushing the boundaries of space and soon I hope underwater exploration but these are the early stages for the pioneers. The majority of people will continue to travel by car and bus, so we need to spend more time researching cleaner fuels and power for the world's expanding fleet. Air travel has grown dramatically in the last 25 years since we started Virgin Atlantic and I see this showing no signs of slowing down.

Low cost carriers in Europe, Asia and South America bring travel to more people and are shrinking our world. This growth comes at a cost. As an industry we need to spend time, money and resources on developing the clean fuels of the future.

Are there any bounds to travel? Will progress mean we will travel through time?

I think Virgin Galactic shows there should be no boundaries. Time travel would be fantastic. I have always wondered what the Roman Empire was like... Where would you want to go? You have got me thinking!

What environmental challenges lie ahead for the aviation industry?

Developing sustainable aviation biofuel for the future is one of the most important tasks facing us. Several airlines have tested various blends of fuels to prove it can be used at altitude.

Now we need to work together with aircraft manufacturers, engine makers and the oil companies on how one would scale the development of these fuels and also put in place the distribution to get the new fuels to the airports and aircraft.

Airlines are looking at waste, sourcing and fuel efficiency - but the development of the future's fuel is by far the biggest challenge.

How would you advise an organisation to foster a positive culture and inspire people?

I have always been a great supporter of the theory that small is beautiful. It allows you to keep close to your staff, your customer and try to keep the right culture thriving. I encourage our management teams (including me) to spend a lot of time on the road and in the air meeting our staff and hearing what they think. Challenging your people to come up with new ideas and acting on them is key to fostering a positive culture. Mix in an inquisitive and spirited founder and you are halfway there!

What about aircraft - will we travel in large airbuses or smaller taxi style aeroplanes?

Aircraft need to be designed for their particular markets. In some cases it will make sense to have a big plane like the Airbus 380 to move 400 people or more at a time. For others you may need smaller planes to reach remote parts of say, the African bush.

You have just tweeted that space travel is not far away. How far do you have to go?

The mother ship flew in the air and we are planning to drop and glide the actual space ship soon. We are carrying out tests for the next year or two and then I will be in a better position to give an exact date.

Premium economy, business, first - what's in store for business travel?

We are planning even more comfortable beds in our upper class suites - some airplanes have bedrooms already, but I think we will focus on more comfort, fun bars and even better entertainment.

What are your onboard creature comforts?

My notebook to scribble thoughts in, and some chocolate.

Is there a ceiling to success? If so, have you hit yours?

I don't think you should set limits to people's ambitions or potential success. You should always keep trying to better yourself and your community. I feel a great drive to keep going and I'm spending a lot of time on my foundation Virgin Unite - helping the team set up philanthropic ventures to tackle climate change, conflict resolution, health issues in South Africa and the revival of Zimbabwe. These are big challenges and ones where I hope I can help.

Do you think Virgin Atlantic will invent a cure for jet lag?

We already have an app to help you deal with it. I'm sure some clever scientist will and we will make sure to try to distribute it.

Interview by Renate Ruge



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