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Which Airplanes and Airlines are the Safest?

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By Terry Smiljanich:

The crash of Air France Flight 447 in Brazil, last week, killing 228 passengers and crew, has renewed questions about airline safety in many people's minds.

How safe is flying? Which airlines have the best track record? What airplane models have fewer fatal crashes?

Flying safety

Last year alone, U.S. airline passengers traveled [798 billion miles](#). During the same period, Americans traveled about [3 trillion miles](#) in automobiles. Using comparative figures, it has been calculated that the chances of a fatality in driving between Boston and Washington, D.C., is [8.5 times greater](#) than the chances of an airline fatality for that same trip. So there is no question that airline safety still beats driving risks by miles.

Statistics show that on average in the U.S. a person dies in a plane crash for every [4 million flights taken](#). These are the kind of odds faced in winning the lottery with a single ticket. You are [more likely to die](#) from stumbling while walking, an accidental firearms discharge, or suffocating in bed while sleeping than from perishing in a plane crash.

Which Airlines Have the Best Safety Record?

The top eight airlines in the United States (those having more than 2 million flights per year) all have good safety records. [Their rank](#), based on the number of fatal events per million miles traveled, is as follows:

1. Southwest Airlines	0.00 (no fatalities in its history)
2. Delta Airlines	0.17
3. Northwest Airlines	0.21
4. Continental Airlines	0.24
5. US Air	0.28
6. United Airlines	0.31
7. Alaska Airlines	0.33
8. American Airlines	0.40

This is an average of 0.24 fatal events per million flights.

How does that compare to the airlines of other countries? The sixteen airlines based in other countries with flights exceeding 2 million per year average 1.10 fatal events per million flights, or more than four times worse than the U.S. average. The [top 5 safest foreign airlines](#) are:

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. British Airlines | 0.17 |
| 2. SAS | 0.19 |
| 3. Lufthansa | 0.22 |
| 4. All Nippon Airlines | 0.22 |
| 5. Air France | 0.72 (not including the 6/1/09 crash) |

The foreign airlines with the [worst fatality records](#) are:

- | | |
|---------------------|------|
| 1. Turkish Airlines | 3.60 |
| 2. Indian Airlines | 3.53 |
| 3. Aeromexico | 1.76 |
| 4. Japan Airlines | 1.36 |
| 5. SwissAir | 1.20 |

It should be noted that the official airline of China, Air China, [does not release mileage or accident statistics](#). It is a good bet that if China does not want the world to know the answers to these questions, it must not like the answers.

There is no doubt that the American airline industry is on average the safest in the world.

What Airplanes Have the Best Safety Records

The top 5 airplanes currently in production and flown in more than 10 million flights per year [rank as follows](#):

- | | |
|----------------|------|
| 1. Airbus A320 | 0.13 |
| 2. ATR 42/72 | 0.33 |
| 3. Boeing 737 | 0.36 |
| 4. Boeing 767 | 0.40 |
| 5. Boeing 747 | 0.76 |

Other airplanes no longer in production but [still flying](#) include the Boeing MD80/90 (0.26), the Boeing 757 (0.30), the Boeing 727 (0.49) and the Airbus 300 (0.54).

What about the Airbus A330 involved in the Air France disaster? This airplane came into production in the late 90's. [1,021 planes have been ordered, but only 609 have actually been delivered](#).

Compared to the Airbus A320 ([6,321 ordered, 3,893 delivered](#)), comparatively few of the A330 planes are in the air. The fatality statistics kept on this plane are currently unavailable, perhaps due to the lack of a sufficient track record, but the Air France crash will obviously push this model nearly to the top of the list.

This might be considered an unfair comparison, since only one accident can seriously skew the statistics. Take the Concorde SST, the supersonic airline in operation from 1976 to 2003. It only had [one fatal accident](#) in its entire history, but because it flew less than 100,000 flights total, its fatal events per million flights is [11.36](#), the highest of any aircraft model.

It could be argued that statistics such as these are misleading, since so few airline crashes occur, making them susceptible to the vagaries of chance occurrences. What can be gleaned from these statistics, however, is that the major airplane models in current use have good track records, and that the air safety regulations in a few other countries are suspect.



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