A Boeing 747 filled

(PDF)

Car manufacturers have done a lot to improve fuel consumption in the last 30 years. Most middle-aged adults can remember their parents filling the tank on the family's old gas-guzzlers several times a week. Today, most modern, fuel-efficient cars get more than 35 or 40 miles to the gallon, a vast improvement. But -- truth told -- if you want even better mileage, you should drive a Boeing 747.

Ridiculous, of course, but the facts tell an interesting tale. A Boeing 747 filled with passengers to only 75 percent capacity is more fuel-efficient than an automobile with a driver and one passenger in terms of fuel burn per passenger mile. Hard to believe, isn't it? Because the aviation industry has worked so diligently to reduce airplane fuel consumption, newer Boeing airplanes are twice as fuel efficient as those built 30 years ago. Compared with 50 years ago, the reduction is an even more dramatic -- 70 percent.

Saving fuel has benefits in addition to cutting costs. For every pound of fuel saved, there are equivalent reductions in emissions of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides. Modern aircraft engines have about 85 percent fewer emissions for every pound of fuel burned than engines built in the 1970s.

In fact, the idea that airplanes are among the worst polluters is highly inaccurate. According to a 1999 report issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, airplane-fuel emissions total less than 3 percent of man-made emissions that might contribute to climate change. By far the biggest producers of emissions are cars, trucks, buses, motorcycles, power plants, home heating systems and industrial manufacturing.

"Because we know it benefits our customers and the public, we target performance beyond the regulatory compliance," said Bill Glover, director of Airplane Environmental Performance Strategy for Boeing Commercial Airplanes. "It just makes good business sense."

The business case behind Boeing's constant search for improved fuel consumption is the desire to build airplanes its customers will prefer, and that means a family of jets that are fuel efficient and better for the environment. In recent years, fuel efficiency has become one of the most important selling features of an airplane.

So, while you can't trade in the family car for a 747, you can at least appreciate what Boeing is doing to help keep down pollution and fuel costs, which in turn helps airlines offer lower ticket prices.

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