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Flying car is no pie-in-sky dream

Steven Cole Smith

AUTOMOTIVE

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LAKELAND — "This is the coolest thing I've ever seen," said 20-year-old David Green of Orlando. "I really hope they can get it off the ground."

His pun was intended. Green was admiring the Terrafugia Transition, an airplane that in a couple of years you should also be able to drive on the street, if it all works out the way Carl Dietrich hopes it does.

Dietrich, 32, is the designer of the Transition and the chief executive officer of Terrafugia, the Boston-area company that will build it. The Terrafugia Transition was on display in April at the Sun 'n Fun Fly-In in Lakeland.

The Transition made its first test flight in New York on March 5. "A lot of people said they never thought it would fly," Dietrich said. "But we have a vehicle here right now that drives and flies, and converts between the two in 20 seconds, and you can see it."

But you can't have it. Yet, anyway. Dietrich plans to begin deliveries at the end of 2011. The price: \$194,000. A refundable deposit of \$10,000 will hold your place in line. He'd like to sell maybe 200 a year but can make money at half that volume.

Dietrich spent 12 years at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology getting his bachelor's, master's and Ph.D. from the Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics. There are 35 investors in the company, he says, including himself. Dietrich won the \$30,000 Lemelson-MIT Student Prize for outstanding innovation and used it to build the first prototype of the Transition, which he first displayed in 2006.

Since March, the Transition has made six more test flights, all of them basically a runway-length takeoff and a landing, at altitudes of 100 feet or less.

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The test pilot, a retired Air Force colonel, told Dietrich that "the flight was remarkably unremarkable,' and that was exactly what we wanted to hear."

Though Dietrich has been a pilot since he was 17, he has resisted the urge to fly the Transition himself. "Too much at stake," he said, "and we have only the one you see here." That's also why the Transition didn't fly at the Lakeland Sun 'n Fun.

Plus, Dietrich said, the model is a prototype that differs considerably from the next-generation vehicle he is working on now.

The idea of a flying car dates back to the early 1900s, and there have been more than 100 designs, but none were commercially successful. Dietrich thinks the Transition has one thing going for it the others didn't. It converts from an airplane to a car at the touch of a button, which folds the two-piece wings up next to the body.

It will be certified, he said, as a Light Sport Aircraft, a relatively new FAA class for smaller, simpler two-seat planes that can be flown with as little as 20 hours of training.

The Transition is powered by a 100-horsepower, four-cylinder, four-stroke engine. In the air, a carbon fiber shaft powers the four-blade propeller at the rear. On the ground, the wings fold in the middle and nestle vertically next to the body. The power going to the propeller is diverted to the front wheels.

The Transition has not undergone full-speed road testing, but Dietrich figures it will go 65 to 70 mph, and get 30 miles per gallon. In the air, it will fly 400 miles at 100 knots on a 20-gallon tank of premium gas you can buy at any service station. It needs 1,700 feet to take off, but it can land in 500 feet. You land, drive home, and put the Terrafugia in the garage — no hangar needed.

On the road, the Transition would be registered as a "multi-purpose vehicle" designed primarily for off-road use. Total maximum weight is 1,320 pounds, which should cover two medium-size adults and a little luggage.

Exactly how such a light, comparatively tall vehicle will handle crosswinds on the expressway remains to be seen, but remember, no one is calling the Transition a daily-commute car.

But it is, however, the coolest thing David Green has ever seen. And it's hard to argue with him.

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