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## Airlines Face Traveler Crash Fears

A flurry of deadly plane crashes recently has passengers questioning airline safety. But statistics show that flight is safer than ever

By [Mark Scott](#)

The global airline industry isn't having a good year. A half-dozen crashes in the first half of 2009 have killed 582 people worldwide—more than the total for all of 2008. In many parts of the world regulatory oversight of airlines is minimal, notably in Africa and parts of Asia. For European and North American carriers, which have built enviable safety records in recent years, the risks of flight are receiving new attention just as the airlines struggle with a recession that has decimated revenue and kept profitable business travelers at home.

The high-profile accidents, including an Air France ([AIRF.PA](#)) Airbus A330 that [crashed off the Brazilian coast](#) on June 1, killing all 228 people on board, have raised questions about airline safety. Yet despite this year's tragic events, industry experts reckon improvements in aircraft technology, better training for pilots and ground staff, and an expansion of global maintenance standards have made the industry progressively more safe. Tougher regulation, particularly from U.S. and European authorities, also has clamped down on airlines with less than stellar track records.

"You can't judge the industry on a spate of tragic accidents in a short period of time," says Paul Hayes, director of air safety at London-based consultant Ascend, which produces an annual report on airliner loss rates for insurance companies. "It's at least 200 times safer to fly now than it was in the 1950s."

Indeed, the number of fatal accidents in 1950, when only 31 million travelers took to the skies, totaled 39 and led to 799 people losing their lives, according to data from Ascend. That compares with 13 crashes and 460 casualties last year, despite airline-passenger numbers jumping to 2.6 billion worldwide.

### STRICT GOVERNMENT STANDARDS ARE KEY

The abundance of high-quality new jets, particularly from Boeing ([BA](#)) and Airbus, has played a major factor. While the earliest version of the Boeing 737, which entered service more than 40 years ago, tops the list of the world's most accident-prone planes (based on Ascend's figures), the company's latest offering, the 777, has never had a fatal accident since entering service in 1995. The Airbus A340, which has been around for 16 years, also has a perfect flight record after flying 13 million hours. Boeing says it works with governments and the airline industry to "advance safety in all aspects of the global air transportation system."

Government oversight has similarly helped to improve global airline safety. Since 2006 the European Union has published a quarterly blacklist of carriers that don't meet its safety standards. The carriers, predominantly from Africa and Asia, are refused entry into EU aerospace. They must comply with maintenance spot checks and upgrade their fleets if they want to access the European Union's nearly 500 million potential customers. In the U.S., the Federal Aviation Administration also has stringent safety requirements. Some airlines from countries including Bangladesh, Nicaragua, and even Croatia don't meet the FAA's minimum standards.

Unfortunately, the improvement in airline safety over the last 50 years hasn't stamped out accidents altogether. On June 30 an Airbus ([EAD.PA](#)) A310, which has been mostly phased out of service by major airlines, operated by Yemenia Airlines crashed en route to Comoros from Yemen, killing all but one of the 168 passengers on board. On July 15 a Russian-made Tupolev ([TUPLI.RO](#)) TU-154 operated by Caspian

Air crashed while heading to Armenia, causing 153 fatalities. Investigations into both accidents are ongoing. "We comply with the most stringent air safety laws in the world," says an Airbus spokesman. Tupolev didn't return calls for comment.

The accidents are a reminder that air travel—though by far the safest way to travel in the world—always will come with a level of risk, however low. But according to Ascend's Hayes, travelers shouldn't be overly concerned: "With some many people now flying, the number of fatal accidents is exceeding small."

Click [here](#) to see which are the world's most-accident prone planes.

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