WORLD’S LARGEST AIRCRAFT LEAVES ITS HANGAR FOR THE FIRST TIME

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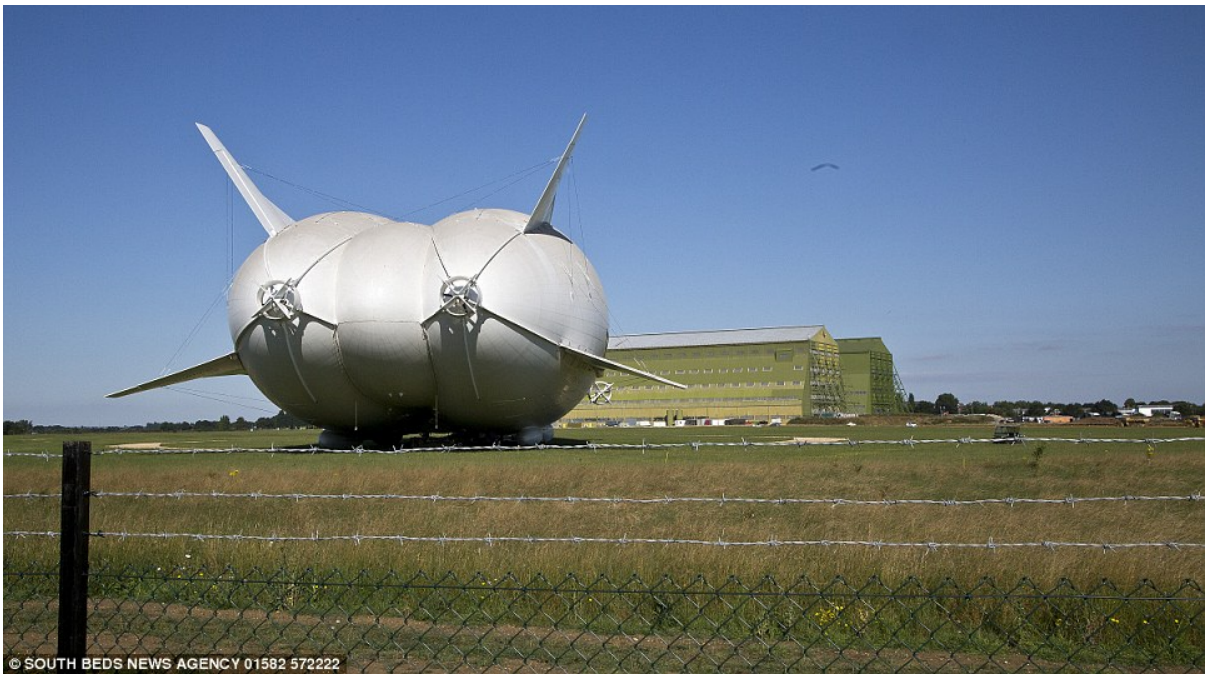
The world's largest aircraft, known fondly as the 'Flying Bum', left its hangar for the first time today.

The Airlander 10, which cost £25million to build over 10 years, is 92 metres long and pumped with a million cubic feet of helium.

The part-plane, part-airship left its hangar in Cardington, Bedfordshire at 4am today to commence a brief series of ground systems tests before its first flight later this month.

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As dawn breaks the sheer size of the plane can be seen from beyond the perimeter of the airfield at Cardington

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It was a delicate operation as there was only a six metre clearance from the fin tip to the sides of the hangar doors

It took around five minutes for the Airlander to clear the hangar and then a further 30 minutes to be towed to rest at the primary mast site.

The aircraft which, at 302ft long, is around 50ft larger than the biggest passenger jets, was first developed for the US government as a long-endurance surveillance aircraft but it fell foul of defence cutbacks.

Airlander has now formally been granted permission to conduct its first series of flight tests by both European Aviation Safety Agency and the UK Civil Aviation Authority.

The project's technical director, Mike Durham, said: 'Last week we successfully completed our final in-hangar all engines, all generators, all systems testing.

'My thanks to the whole business for getting us here. The entire team is looking forward to the final series of tests outside before taking to the skies for the first time.

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The hangar doors at Cardington had to be opened to their fullest extent and even then it was a close thing to get it out

'It was a very smooth first journey for Airlander and she behaved beautifully. We're delighted to have reached this significant milestone.'

A number of tests still need to be conducted on the Airlander 10, christened the Martha Gwyn in April after the wife of Hybrid Air Vehicles chairman Philip Gwyn, but then the flight test program can start.

The aircraft is designed to stay airborne for up to five days at a time to fulfil a wide range of communication and survey roles, as well as carrying cargo and tourist passenger flights.

06 AUGUST 2016

SOURCE: DAILY MAIL
ARTICLE LINK:
https://ut.50skyshades.com/news/events-festivals/worlds-largest-aircraft-leaves-its-hangar-for-the-first-time

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