

# Is it still safe to fly?

**SAFEST MODE:** If statistics from aviation accident tracking agencies are used as the yardstick, aircraft accidents, including fatal ones, occur almost every other day worldwide. Last year, aviation disasters claimed 1,320 lives. However, aviation experts tell P. Selvarani and Arman Ahmad that flying is still the safest mode of travel



ONE in 4.7 million. Those are the odds of a person dying on his next flight.

The year 2014 could not have ended on a worse note for the airline industry — four major air tragedies with one of those planes still unaccounted for.

Air travellers, in Asia, especially, who are still reeling from the shock of the downing of Malaysia Airlines' Flight MH17 in Ukraine in July and the mysterious disappearance of Flight MH370 four months earlier, were certainly not prepared for another air tragedy close to home, when Indonesia AirAsia Flight QZ8501 with 162 people on board, crashed into the Java Sea on Dec 28.

Despite these major tragedies, including the Air Algerie crash (also in July) in Mali that killed 116 people, aviation and security experts stress that flying is safe.

Aviation security expert Narayanan Srinivasan, pro vice-chancellor and professor of security and risk at Edith Cowan University in Australia, says flying is, by far, the safest mode of transport.

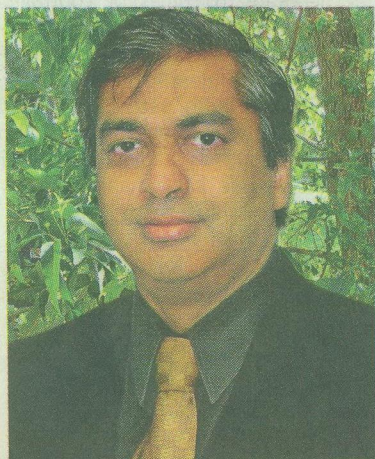
"Statistics show that it is even safer than walking. The only time people got scared was after 9/11. That incident caused a lot of airlines to go bust and airports to suffer.

"One reason for this was that millions watched live TV images of commercial airplanes crashing into the buildings. Enhanced visible security after the incidents also did not help aviaphobics," he says.

Interestingly, he adds, in the months following the terror attacks on several locations in New York and Washington on Sept 11, 2001, the number of car crashes in the United States increased significantly.

"One reason for this was because the people who did not want to fly got into cars for long trips, something which they had not done before. Increased fatalities were also reported."

He says following the tragedy, counselling groups were set up in



**Professor Narayanan Srinivasan** says statistics show flying is **safer than walking**



the US to help people overcome their fear of flying. Virgin, British Airways and a large number of other companies enhanced their "fear of flying courses", and an unprecedented number of aviaphobics enrolled in these programmes.

Dr Azmin Shakrine Mohd Rafie, head of aerospace engineering at Universiti Putra Malaysia, says a great deal of care is put into ensuring planes do not fail.

"They are maintained by the hour. The maintenance is thorough and the Department of Civil Aviation ensures that maintenance is done on time. In terms of safety, airplanes are entirely safe," he adds.

He says that despite last year being the worst for air travel in terms of tragedies, statistics showed that flying by air is still relatively safe.

"If you look at it from a percentage standpoint, it is much safer than travelling by (ground) public transport."



With worldwide air traffic at **33 million flights** last year, the accident rate is **one fatal passenger flight accident per 4,125,000 flights**.

According to the Netherlands-based Aviation Safety Network (ASN), with worldwide air traffic of about 33 million flights, the accident rate is one fatal passenger flight accident per 4,125,000 flights.

Azmin adds that there are hundreds of flights per day that are conducted without incident.

"Aircraft design has taken into consideration all the safety factors. It is designed over the safety factor."

He stresses that aircraft are designed to fly even in bad weather.

Only freak weather conditions, like a tornado, could affect a flight, he says.

"For situations like heavy rain and bad weather, there have been many planes that have gone through this kind of weather unscathed."

Former Royal Malaysian Air Force officer Datuk Ismail Ibrahim echoes his sentiments.

"Once the aircraft has gained altitude, there is usually no problem. If something happens to an aircraft, then, it may be caused by factors like the weather.

"Or maybe the plane had a heavy landing in the past. It might have a crack in the wing. When it flies through bad weather, the wing can fail. Because aircraft fly so fast, even a little resistance can lead to failure," he points out.

"However, flights, in general, are safe. People are worried because three civilian aircraft went down in a year.

"But the truth is that airplanes rarely fail or encounter trouble."

Narayanan says it is not only air crashes that aviaphobics fear.

"The Y2K bug, the recent air traffic control system crash at Heathrow Airport (in London) and the hijacking of airliners are other examples

that cause aviaphobics to reconsider flying."

He says the disappearance of MH370 might have had an impact on Malaysia Airlines in terms of its share price, but it did not have a big impact on ticket sales. Revenue fell seven per cent, but this was also because of cancelled flights and promotions for ticket sales. Likewise, he does not think the recent AirAsia tragedy will have a significant impact on the low-cost carrier.

"Whatever impact will be minimal and very temporary because it is a budget airline, and people will still want to fly it because it's cheap. From what I've read, the numbers (of passengers) for AirAsia did not go down after the tragedy.

"People, as we know, have short memories, and research indicates that frequent flyers of budget airlines are driven, mainly, by price."