

Aviation in Africa

Departure delayed

Africa is ripe for air travel. A pity its governments are holding it back

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SEASONED air travellers who criss-crossed Africa a decade or more ago usually have no shortage of hair-raising tales. One mining executive tells how on take-off in an old Russian jet one of the engines burst into flames. An imperturbable crewman stepped out with an extinguisher, sprayed down the engine and then announced the plane would leave as planned, trying to block the mass exodus of passengers. Another traveller recalls the amusement in the eyes of fellow passengers when he boarded an ancient plane in west Africa. Soon after take-off, as clouds billowed into the cabin, they had a good laugh at the panic on his face until one explained that this always happened when the air-conditioning was turned on.

It is not just the tales that were hair-raising. Hard statistics alone might have grounded all but the most daredevil of travellers (except for the fact that shoddy roads continue to make driving in Africa even more dangerous than flying). In 2011, for instance, Africa accounted for almost a third of all deaths in air crashes around the world, even though it accounted for less than 3% of all air traffic.

The European Union (EU) has banned no fewer than 108 airlines from 14 African countries from its airspace because of safety concerns. These include all airlines registered in, among other countries, Zambia, Sierra Leone, Mozambique and both of the Congos. A recent accident in South Sudan underscores the EU's worries. In November a 44-year-old Antonov crashed on take-off in Juba, the capital. Its Ukrainian manufacturer said it should never have been allowed to fly, because it had not been maintained.

Yet on the whole safety has improved vastly in recent years. Although headline accident rates are still sky-high—in 2014 aircraft in sub-Saharan Africa had a crash rate about 8-11 times higher than those in America and Europe—most of the accidents involved small propeller-driven planes. Look only at jets and the rate falls sharply. Flying on a passenger jet in Africa is now about as safe as it would have been to board a European or American one about two decades ago. And the best African airlines are almost as safe as their global

counterparts, says the International Air Transport Association (IATA).

Safety concerns force travellers to make some unusual compromises. Many international corporations forbid their staff from flying on one Nigerian airline because they think its rival—which is notoriously tardy—is maintained better. Passengers must choose between being late or being less safe.



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Another big change is in the number of flights and destinations knitting Africa together. The number of air

travellers in Africa has almost doubled over the past decade. New routes have also opened, most visibly linking east and west Africa. But routes are often still convoluted, taking long detours via Europe. This is because most African states still regulate flights as if they were in the 1970s. Airlines hoping to open a new route between two countries have to ask their governments to negotiate a bilateral treaty. Approvals can take years, if they are granted at all, as governments try to protect their state-owned carriers.

In instances where African governments have taken steps to liberalise their markets, as Europe and America did from the late 1970s, fares plunge. That, in turn, makes flying affordable to more people, so the number of passengers soars. Fastjet, a London-listed low-cost airline with operations across Africa, says fares charged by the existing carriers flying between Tanzania and Kenya dived 40% overnight when it got permission to fly the same route.

Yet few governments seem willing to open up to competition for fear it would harm their national carriers. “The benefits would be huge,” says Andrew Charlton, head of Aviation Advocacy, a Swiss-based consultancy. “But you would almost certainly see some African airlines disappear.” Protectionism raises fares without making African airlines profitable. They probably lost a collective \$300m in 2015, and are likely to lose another \$100m this year, IATA reckons. When given a choice of airlines on international routes, passengers almost always

opt for foreign carriers over African ones. The African Airlines Association laments that the continent's own airlines only carry 20% of passengers to or from it.

Simply opening up the skies to more competition will not, in itself, allow African aviation to reach its full potential. One barrier is that jet fuel costs about 20% more in Africa than it does elsewhere. This is partly because of antiquated infrastructure but also because governments tax it heavily. There is also little competition between airports, allowing some to charge outrageous landing fees. Countries such as the Central African Republic are unable to control traffic in their airspace, leaving pilots to chat directly with one another to avoid collisions. That works in uncrowded skies but gets riskier as they fill up.

Still, some airlines are innovating in the face of adversity. Many of Fastjet's customers don't have credit cards, so it accepts mobile money sent from their phones instead. One Nigerian airline seems to have hit upon a subscription model of ticket sales: after your correspondent bought a single flight on a credit card, the airline proceeded to charge him again every month for the flight until an employee, aptly named Amicable, put a stop to it.