THE HISTORY OF COMMERCIAL FLIGHT – HOW GLOBAL TRAVEL TOOK OFF

News / Airlines

Flying has become the transport of choice for business travellers and holidaymakers across the globe and is now considered one of the fastest, most convenient and safest forms of long-distance travel. But how did commercial flights go from being exclusively for the wealthy to the mainstream and affordable option it is today? Artemis Aerospace guides us through the different decades of air travel and how it has shaped modern-day living

The first commercial flight

The first ever passenger flight took off in May 1908 when Wilbur Wright carried Charles Furnas just 2000 feet across the beach at Kitty Hawk in North Carolina. Just one year later, and the first airline in the world – German airship company DELAG – was founded.

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In 1914, the world’s first scheduled passenger service, an airboat piloted by Tony Jannus, set off from St Petersburg in Florida and landed at Tampa – around 17 miles away. The service only ran for four months, but it had unlocked the appetite of those keen to tap into the novelty of air transport.

A new era of aviation

However, it wasn’t until the 1920s when commercial flights carrying paying passengers started to become commonplace with the introduction of the multi-engine aeroplane, the Lawson C-2, which was specifically built to carry passengers.

During this time, more and more start-up airline carriers were being established - some of which are still in operation today. These include KLM in the Netherlands (1919), Colombia’s Avianca (1919), Qantas in Australia (1920) and Czech Airlines (1923).

Aircraft from this period would land frequently to refuel and fly at lower altitudes due to unpressurised cabins. This made travelling by plane noisy, cold and expensive. Flying times were lengthy and turbulence was frequent. Passengers regularly experienced air sickness and many airlines hired nurses to reduce anxiety and tend to those affected.

In 1935, one of the world’s oldest airlines, Qantas, operated its first international passenger flight, travelling from Brisbane to Singapore. From there, the British-owned Imperial Airways connected this flight to the UK. This was to set the wheels in motion for creating a regular travel route between Australia and the UK in the coming decades.

Despite flying being incredibly dangerous and extremely expensive during this period, it was still a fashionable way to travel for the rich. According to the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, the number of airline passengers grew from just 6,000 in 1930 to nearly half a million by 1934 - the aviation industry was well on its way to becoming hugely important to the global

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economy.

Innovation that revolutionised air travel

The introduction of the Douglas DC-3 in 1935 also had a big impact on the future of commercial flight. The propeller-driven airliner was a larger and much improved aircraft compared to its predecessors. Faster and more reliable, it could carry up to 32 passengers and had a cruising speed of 207mph with a range of 1500 miles. This made it popular with well-established airlines, including Delta, TWA, American and United, who soon added the aircraft to their fleets.

During the 1940s, the onset of WWII meant commercial aviation developments slowed considerably. However, by the end of the decade, the industry was heading towards a new era as Pan Am began operating its fleet of Boeing 307s, which featured the first ever pressurised cabin. This transformed air travel for passengers, allowing them to enjoy a comfortable experience at an altitude of 20,000 feet. Major airlines were now ramping up their advertising spend and offering travellers smooth journeys to far flung destinations and business hubs, including Pan Am's iconic New York to London route.

The Golden Age of Air Travel

The 1950s and 1960s heralded the age of the jet engine aircraft and with it came an upsurge in commercial flights, airline carriers and international flying routes.

Commercial air travel was booming, and major airlines were fiercely competitive, offering passengers more and more inflight perks, including lavish silver-service meals and fine wines.

The airline carrier Pan Am was a front runner in pioneering and marketing the very best air travel had to offer. It was the first airline to fly worldwide and introduced ground-breaking changes to the industry, such as adding jet aircraft to their fleets and utilising computerised reservation systems.

In the 1960s, work began on creating the world's first supersonic aircraft and what would eventually become an iconic symbol of commercial flight, the Concorde. Offering transatlantic flights in just 3.5 hours, the aircraft was a hit with business travellers and royalty alike. However, tickets were extremely expensive and only a privileged few could afford to travel via Concorde.

The rise of the no frills airline

Seeing a gap in the market for making air travel more accessible to everyday people, British-owned Laker Airways, which was founded in 1966 by Freddie Laker, was one of the first airlines to start offering a budget alternative by adjusting its inflight offer.

Using the budget airline business model that is commonplace today, Laker was able to offer lower price fares by reducing inflight services and luxuries, such as free meals. The airline also found innovative ways to reduce fuel consumption and engine wear by introducing the reduced thrust take-off technique and faster climbs to obtain the optimum flying altitude in as little time as possible. Sadly, the airline was a casualty of the 1980s' recession and subsequently went bankrupt. However, it had paved the way for budget travel and had opened a world of possibilities for millions more people to get the chance to travel by air.

Today, the world's largest low-cost carrier is Southwest Airlines in the US. Synonymous with budget travel, the company's low-cost domestic and short haul offer has undoubtedly inspired many other well-known brands to tap into the no-frills market, including Ryanair and EasyJet.

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Air travel for the masses

Larger and more economical aircraft, such as the Boeing 747, had also made cheaper air travel possible. Airlines were now able to carry more passengers than ever before, meaning ticket prices could be sold at a reduced rate. Holidaying abroad was no longer reserved for the rich.

This change in dynamics meant airlines now started to look for different ways to retain the luxurious service and long lunches that had been synonymous with the golden age of travel, without compromising on providing a budget alternative.

First-class cabins, sophisticated onboard bars and exclusive-use airport lounges meant those who could afford to, could still travel in style.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the budget airlines Ryanair and EasyJet launched. Offering airfares for as little as £20, they changed the face of commercial flying and put pressure on traditional carriers to lower ticket prices.

Security tightening in the 2000s

The tragic events of 9/11 had a profound effect on air travel. Security at airports was increased significantly and passengers without a ticket at US airports could no longer accompany friends and family through security to the gate.

Cockpit security also heightened. Previously, it had been possible for passengers to visit the flight deck and speak to the pilots. However, after 2001, cockpit doors were locked with only the pilots controlling who could enter.

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A new era for air travel

According to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, it took until 2004 for air passenger numbers to reach pre-9/11 levels and until 2007 to reach a record high.

During this period, low-cost carriers were experiencing increased demand as the popularity of booking websites surged and, by 2009, figures from the tourism research company PhoCusWright reported that half of all travel-related bookings were being made online.

Passenger numbers continued to surge throughout the 2010s and by the end of the decade the volume of travellers using commercial airlines was at an all-time high.

The post-pandemic era – flying into a new age for aviation

Prior to the pandemic, the International Air Transport Association predicted that the number of airline passengers could reach 7.2 billion by 2035. However, nobody in the industry could prepare for the global aircraft groundings and unpredictable travel restrictions caused by COVID-19.

Despite this, the industry is full of optimism. As we enter a new era for aviation, and reflect on the past, we can be confident that no matter what obstacles we encounter, air travel will prevail.

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