

APAC airlines down but on way back to better times : Cirium

A Monitor Report

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Beijing : Data intelligence and analytics firm Cirium released its 2021 Airline Passenger Rankings on September 1. The headline rankings show US airlines filling the top four slots for passenger traffic and North America becoming the largest region for traffic in 2021. The rankings are based on Cirium's traffic returns from more than 600 airlines.

Globally passenger traffic reached its peak of 4.7 billion journeys in 2019 before plummeting by more than 60 per cent in 2020. While 2021 volumes rose by 29 per cent to 2.35 billion, that was still only half of pre-pandemic 2019. When measured by Revenue Passenger Kilometers (RPKs), the collapse is starker, with 2021 reaching just 43 per cent of 2019 levels. For the uninitiated, RPKs are calculated by multiplying the number of revenue-paying passengers aboard an aircraft by the distance the aircraft travelled.

Based on RPKs, American Airlines topped the table with 237.47 million, followed by Delta Air Lines (195.31m), United Airlines (178.5m) and Southwest Airlines (166.6m). They were the only US airlines in the top ten, with the other six places filled (in order) by Ryanair, China Southern, Emirates, Qatar Airways, China Eastern Airlines and Turkish Airlines.

The table tilts slightly towards low-cost carriers when measured by passenger

volume, although American Airlines again fills the number one slot. The rest of the top ten was Southwest Airlines, Delta Air Lines, Ryanair, United Airlines, China Southern Airlines, China Eastern Airlines, IndiGo and Turkish Airlines.

While all regions fell heavily in 2020, the only region to carry fewer passengers in 2021 vs. 2020 was Asia-Pacific. In 2019 Asia-Pacific (APAC), primarily driven by China, took over as the global center of aviation, capturing 34 per cent of world traffic by RPK.

In 2020, domestic travel in China kept strong demand, lifting APAC's global share to 40 per cent, well ahead of Europe (25pc) and North America (22pc). However, the table changed in 2021, with North America accounting for 30 per cent and APAC and Europe at 27 per cent.

The lack of any real recovery in 2021 also showed in Japan, with All Nippon Airways and Japan Airlines ending 2021 still 75 pc down on 2019 levels. It was worse for South Korean carriers, Korean Air and Asiana Airlines, who went backward in 2021, dropping close to 90 pc below 2019. In Southeast Asia, Thai Airways and Malaysia Airlines dropped out of the top 200 rankings, with LCC AirAsia just hanging on at 178, falling from 44th in 2019. India's IndiGo was a rare winner in APAC, climbing from 26 in 2019 to 10 in 2021.

In Australia, Qantas was the highest ranked at 77 (from 44th), followed by Jetstar at 90 (from 64th) and Virgin Australia at 92 (from 60th). Across the Tasman, Air New Zealand ranked at 117, quite a drop from 55 in 2019, but another example of a country with a strict lockdown policy.

Despite the impact of strict lockdowns, APAC airlines fill 13 of the top 50 places, which includes IndiGo, Air India and Singapore Airlines.