

## Airlines forecast record passenger numbers in 2026: IATA

- A Monitor Desk Report

Date: 15 December, 2025



Dhaka: Global air travel is expected to reach a record 5.2 billion passengers in 2026 as airlines fill more seats amid aircraft shortages, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said.

Passenger numbers would rise 4.4pc from an estimated 4.99 billion in 2025, surpassing previous forecasts and marking a new high for the industry, IATA said at its global media briefing in Geneva.

Average return airfares are projected to edge up to \$402 in 2026 from \$400 in 2025 but remain 36.8pc below 2015 levels.

Airlines are forecast to achieve a record passenger load factor of 83.8pc next year, driven by limited aircraft supply.

In Asia-Pacific, the world's largest aviation market, load factors are expected to hit an all-time high of 84.4pc, despite slower international

recovery.

Passenger demand in the region is forecast to grow 7.3pc, aided by easing visa restrictions for travel involving China, though flight limits between the United States and China continue to cap growth.

Industry ticket revenues are expected to rise 4.8pc to \$751 billion in 2026, while total revenues are forecast to reach \$1.05 trillion.

Net profit is projected at \$41 billion, up from \$39.5 billion in 2025, with margins remaining slim at 3.9pc, or about \$7.90 per passenger.

IATA Director General Willie Walsh said profitability remains weak despite strong demand, citing rising costs, supply chain bottlenecks, geopolitical tensions and aircraft delivery delays.

The aircraft order backlog has exceeded 17,000 planes, equivalent to about 60pc of the active fleet, with slow production estimated to cost airlines more than \$11 billion in 2025.

Fuel costs are expected to fall slightly to \$252 billion in 2026, though fuel consumption will rise to 106 billion gallons as fleet renewal is delayed. Spending on sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) is projected at \$4.5 billion, accounting for just 0.8pc of total fuel use.

Walsh said SAF availability, rather than price, remains the main obstacle to meeting emissions targets.

IATA warned that supply constraints and high supplier margins are likely to weigh on airline profitability well beyond the near term, adding it is exploring legal options to address the issue.

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