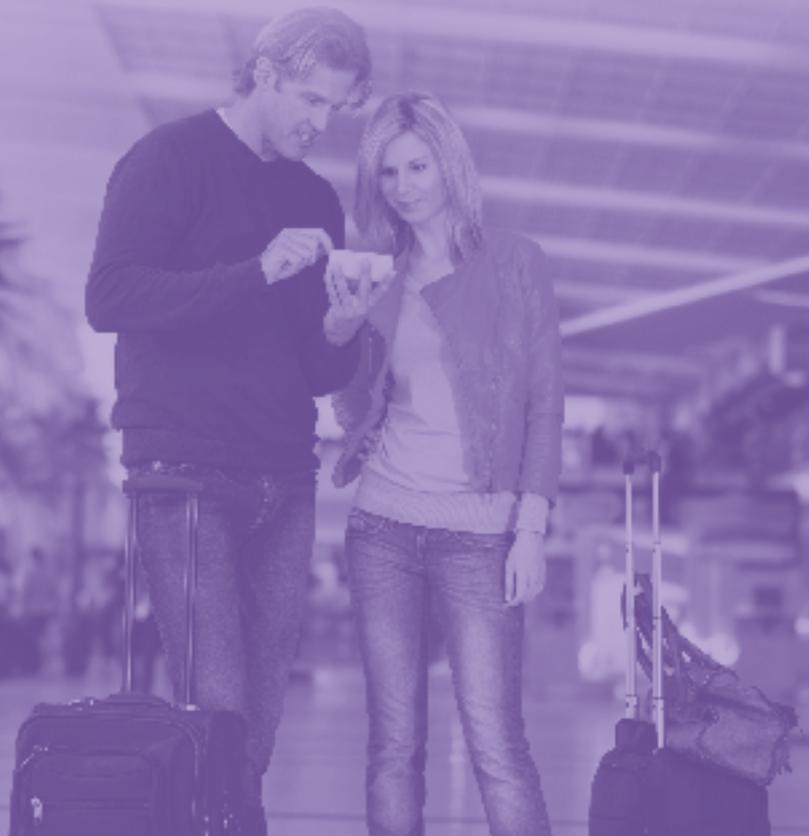


Global travel for all



Essay by Dr Marc Dierikx

Following dispersed early experiments before 1914, air transport started out in the first years after the end of World War I as an experiment in Europe as to whether there would be a market for rapid travel by aeroplane that might compete with journeys by rail or sea. It took time to catch on. Airports generally were difficult to access and lacked all of the comforts we now associate with air transport. In many cases, the aircraft hangar was the only building on the landing ground and combined technical functions with a corner set apart for passenger handling. Although airline advertisements boasted comforts on-board comparable to those of first class rail or sea travel, actual conditions for passengers were spartan: light-weight wicker chairs instead of leather cushioned seats; nothing to eat or drink; ear plugs against the deafening engine noise; a tin or a paper bag for depositing the results of air sickness caused by low flying. Small wonder then that passengers could opt to receive a special certificate, signed by the pilot, that they had actually flown (and now lived to tell the tale).

Reliability was also an issue. Aircraft, often with a single engine, were accident prone. Some airlines only hired pilots who had previously proven themselves capable of surviving emergency landings. The custom of handing out life vests on flights across water entailed more than a discrete warning. The situation only began to change with the spread of multi-engine aircraft in the mid-1920s. Nonetheless, flying remained a hazardous way to travel, a fact that was aggravated by the absence of dependable weather forecasts and radio communications. Air transport in general was limited to the months between April and November, winter conditions being regarded as impediments to flying as such. Speed in the air was relatively low and on the longer routes the difference between air and rail travel was often that between spending the night in a railway sleeper carriage, or in a hotel bed at the destination – overcome with exhaustion after suffering the discomforts of the flight.

Given these circumstances, early airlines aimed at travelling businessmen and government officials on missions that involved some urgency. Businessmen must be taken literally: only a minority of airline passengers were women, in most cases spouses

accompanying their husbands. Attracting clientèle was no easy matter. Flights were few and only the ‘busiest’ routes boasted daily departures. Apart from the adverse conditions on board, there was the question of price: airline tickets were horrendously expensive and a flight from, say, Amsterdam to London cost the equivalent of an average worker’s monthly wages. No surprise then that in the 1920s, the typical flight carried fewer than two passengers. Airlines survived on government subsidies and on the carriage of freight, in particular mail. In the early days, air transport meant mail transport. Indeed, in the United States all scheduled flying involved airmail operations until the second half of the 1920s.

Nonetheless, protagonists of air travel liked to present the aircraft as a means of transport that would unite people living in distant parts of the globe. When the first fully-fledged airlines took off in the spring of 1919, they were greeted as the heralds of a new age in which air travel would ‘shorten’ distances and contribute to a better, harmonious and more integrated world. That world was understood to be on a ‘western’ mould. Air services catered to the travel needs of the upper classes, and to their colonial interests. Imperial air services

aimed to strengthen a perceived superiority. Passengers on the air routes to Asia, Africa and South America were predominantly caucasian functionaries and administrators whose need for rapid transport lay in the political bonds of the day. In the 1930s, the French pilot-turned-novelist Antoine de Saint-Exupéry combined his personal reminiscences of piloting with an effort to spread the magic of the flying experience as such. It was his firm belief that air travel, partaking in the enchantment of flight, would create friendship between all humans inhabiting the planet earth, and would thus

passenger figures more than doubled in these years, with the transatlantic market taking precedence as old empires crumbled.

The numbers would continue to grow at double digits for the next decade and beyond. These were the golden days of air travel, reproduced time and again in airline advertisements depicting the upwardly mobile thirty-something passengers relaxing whilst enjoying drinks, a smoke and each other's company in the peculiar atmosphere of an aircraft bar at 20,000 feet. On the ground, airports were redeveloped to look like

of distance, but for permanent settlement elsewhere on the planet. This process was not limited to the industrialised countries. Economic stagnation in the Third World, political repression and violations of human rights put growing numbers of people on the move across the globe, seeking refuge from deprivation, insecurity and persecution.

To negotiate the distance to the industrialised and economically booming countries of the North, air transportation became the mode of choice. Indeed, the ever growing web of international and intercontinental air services drew Europe closer to the problems that a retreating colonialism had left behind in Asia and Africa. Similar developments manifested themselves between the United States and Latin America. Nonetheless, travel by air contributed to the spread - and mash - of cultures that has become a normal part of modern life. The effects of mass air transport have created the need to address cultures, conceptions, and beliefs outside one's own field of heritage.

In a world where borders are only lines on a map, the lines in the air contribute to a new, increasingly global civilisation despite increased border controls and perceived security risks. In more ways than one, the toy of the rich has become the tool of the poor. In this sense the inception of low-cost carriers in the 1990s has had a considerable impact. In several parts of the world it enabled an influx of temporary migrant workers, living in two locations at once, using cheap air travel to transpose between 'home' and 'work' environments.

In a little over a 100 years, aviation technology has evolved much more rapidly than people and cultures. Its effects have been considerable. In a closely knit world, the vastly increased personal experience with, and perception of, other cultures revealed just as many risks of rejection as of acceptance of different beliefs and ways of life. Aviation opened and closed the door on the emergence of a true global society – the very thing that visionaries of its glorious future such as Saint-Exupéry had held so high when flight was still about uniting all peoples in a new and better world.

Dr Marc Dierikx is the author of *Clipping the Clouds: How Air Travel Changed the World*.

The rise of the tourist promised to deliver on the expectations that had come with the rise of air transport: a world in which the air would unite all people

contribute to a new and better society, a true Terre des Hommes – planet of man. Despite a gradual increase in the numbers of airline passengers, such high hopes did not materialise before the next onslaught of worldwide violence between 1939 and 1945.

When the war ended in 1945, aviation faced new challenges. Governments the world over came to realise that aircraft might be used to create something of a temporary means of transportation at a time when roads, bridges, railway depots and canals had to be rebuilt. This would serve a reconstruction of international trade. Hundreds of military cargo aircraft were converted for civil use. Even before America's Marshall Plan for the economic reconstruction of Europe came into effect in 1948, the market for air transportation to and from the United States showed very rapid growth. Wartime developments in aviation technology coincided with worldwide recognition that the United States emerged from the conflict as the planet's leading nation, not just in the military sense, but also in economics, in technology, and even in culture. Air transportation was instrumental in spreading American goods, technology and ideas across the globe. A new market for air travel evolved: flights across the Atlantic. World

architectural marvels of modernity and design. Yet airline passage continued to be prohibitively expensive and beyond the means of the average traveller. Not until the advent of the jet age, around 1960, did the social composition of the average airline flight begin to shift. A period of continuous economic growth in the western world provided for increased disposable incomes and leisure time. These developments coincided with the introduction and spread of larger, faster aircraft, and the rise of the new phenomenon of relatively low-priced charter flights. The combination broadened the market for air travel beyond all previous planning and would eventually change it beyond recognition.

Since the 1960s, decreasing ticket prices made it possible to travel by air for other than commercial or government purposes. The rise of the tourist, or the individual leisure traveller, not only changed aviation. It promised to deliver on the expectations that had come with the rise of air transport: a world in which the air would unite all people. In the 1960s the first contours of a more globally balanced composition of air travellers began to show: more tickets were being sold in countries situated in the Southern hemisphere. Increasing numbers of passengers were travelling not for a temporary negotiation