TAP Air Portugal

A modern classic

Portugal’s flag-carrier was founded 62 years ago. With its exciting but varied history, this Airbus carrier is now in a good position to continue to expand and achieve sustained profitability in the coming years.

It is night time in Lisbon as a TAP Portugal A320-200 approaches the airport. From its cockpit, the brightly lit Vasco da Gama bridge over the bay of Lisbon is clearly visible in the distance. Named after the famous seaman and explorer who established a sea route to India in the 16th century, the bridge spans 17 kilometres and is the longest in Europe. Flying in a wide arc above the sea, the twinjet lines up on the ILS approach to runway 35, the longer of the two runways at Portela airport. The airport, now located inside the city of Lisbon as a result of urban expansion, takes its name from the neighbouring parish of Portela. It was at this airport that British and German aeroplanes stood next to each other during World War II. Portugal had declared its neutrality and Lisbon became a centre for smuggling people into and out of occupied Europe.

Today, only two of the original four runways remain, and the airport is bursting at the seams – not least because of TAP’s busy flight schedule. Situated on the Tejo river, Lisbon is considered to be one of Europe’s most fascinating capitals. It has gone from being an insider’s tip to a major tourist destination.

In the same year, the airline set up flights to Tangier and Casablanca in Morocco. For flights to southern Africa, TAP commissioned its newly acquired Douglas C-54 Skymasters, as these could cover greater distances and were able to cross the Sahara nonstop, thus significantly reducing the flight time required for the journey. In November 1955, a pair of Lockheed L-1049G Super Constellations were put into service on the ‘imperial route’ to Mozambique. However, the journey to Lourenço Marques remained a long one, lasting 22 hours even with what was the most advanced four-engine airliner at the time. Two years later, TAP also used its ‘Super Connies’ for flights to London and Paris.

In 1959 the airline decommissioned its DC-3s, so that by the beginning of the 1960s the TAP fleet consisted of three Douglas DC-4s, a small airline called CTA (Companhia de Transportes Aéreos).

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In 1945: TAP is founded

TAP is Portugal’s flag-carrier and was founded in 1945. However, it was not the first Portuguese airline. Aero Portuguesa, which was half-owned by Air France, was founded before the war and operated flights to Tangier until it closed down in 1953.

On 19 September 1946, TAP commissioned two Douglas DC-3 Dakotas for the 508-kilometre flight from Lisbon to Madrid. As early as 31 December of the same year, flight operations began on the world’s longest DC-3 route, a journey of 12,000 kilometres. A return flight took fifteen days, and the Dakotas made twelve stopovers on the way to their destination. Lourenço Marques, now called Maputo, the capital of Mozambique.

There are even plans to build a second terminal with new boarding gates and parking positions by 2010. In addition, Air Portugal intends to build a new maintenance hangar, even though it will only be in service for ten years at the most.

1946: TAP’s first flight

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The company soon required additional capital to maintain and further expand its enlarged network. So the government partially privatised TAP in 1953, thus securing financial input from banks as well as from companies in the transport and other industries. In the same year, the airline set up flights to Tangier and Casablanca in Morocco. For flights to southern Africa, TAP commissioned its newly acquired Douglas C-54 Skymasters, as these could cover greater distances and were able to cross the Sahara nonstop, thus significantly reducing the flight time required for the journey. In November 1955, a pair of Lockheed L-1049G Super Constellations were put into service on the ‘imperial route’ to Mozambique. However, the journey to Lourenço Marques remained a long one, lasting 22 hours even with what was the most advanced four-engine airliner at the time. Two years later, TAP also used its ‘Super Connies’ for flights to London and Paris.

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the 707 route from Lisbon to New York became operational. The classic four-jet airliner was also temporarily used on the ‘Friendship Flight’ route to Brazil, a service soon ended in 1967.

After acquiring the three-engine Europe Jet 727 in March 1967, TAP became the first European airline to own a fleet consisting solely of jet aircraft. Further destinations to be added to the company’s flight schedule that year included Zurich, Copenhagen, Recife, Buenos Aires and Salisbury. The airline also installed its first computer in the same year, introducing the use of management programmes.

From 1968 to 1975, TAP continued to expand, setting up routes to Amsterdam, Frankfurt and Sao Paolo and opening a maintenance hall for engine inspections. The airline also began operating simulators for the 707 and acquired additional Boeing aircraft of both types. In 1969, TAP launched an air-taxi service called Transportes Aéreos Continentais (which closed down in 1985) and acquired a stake in the airline SATA, based in the Azores. In 1971 several new facilities were opened and commissioned.

Among them were the airline’s new headquarters as well as a new maintenance hangar and a training centre.

One of the next destinations to be added was Montreal in Canada. Then, in 1972, the first Boeing 747 joined the TAP fleet. From that year on, the airline took charge of overhauling the Jumbo’s JT 9D engines itself, the only European airline technically capable of doing so.

In 1975, TAP was re-nationalised, and the fleet was supplemented with additional Boeing 727s. 1976 saw the launch of new services to Milan, Caracas in Venezuela, and Kinshasa in the African Congo.

In the following year, TAP suffered the only major fatal accident in its history. It was on a rainy day at Funchal airport that a 727 shot off the end of the wet runway, killing 131 passengers. This did not prevent the airline from winning the Technical Management Award in Lyon in 1978.

From A check to C check, ‘TAP Maintenance & Engineering’ has the know-how and resources needed to handle a broad range of aircraft types.

three DC-6s and five Lockheed Super Constellations. This meant that TAP was still a relatively small airline with a European market share of less than one percent.

From 1960 onwards, TAP also operated a flight to Brazil, Portugal’s former colony. The connection was established with the help of the Brazilian carrier Panair and was labelled the ‘Friendship Flight’.

The start of the new decade also marked the dawn of a new era of jet aircraft at TAP. Four Comet 4Bs were leased from British European Airways (BEA) and placed in service on the route between Lisbon and London. In 1962, however, TAP switched to a small fleet of self-owned Caravelle jets which initially flew between Lisbon and Madrid, and later also covered the new routes to Frankfurt and Munich. The airline also installed a Caravelle simulator shortly afterwards. In the same year, TAP ordered several Boeing 707s. These were delivered from 1965 onwards and were used on the route to Johannesburg, while the Caravelles flew between Lisbon and Brussels.

On 19 June 1964, 18 years after the first TAP flight, the airline welcomed its one-millionth passenger on board, and set up a new service to Funchal on Madeira along with several other routes. The delivery of the first 707 in 1965 marked the beginning of a new era of jet aircraft truly capable of long-haul flights.

On 17 June, the TAP Boeing flew for the first time to Rio de Janeiro, a milestone in the history of the company. The aircraft touched down in Rio – exactly 43 years after flight pioneers Cabral and Coutinho landed their floatplane back in 1922. Soon after...
In 1997 the company’s management decided to rejuvenate the airline’s corporate identity by changing its name from TAP to ‘TAP Air Portugal’. Early in the 1980s, the airline began to phase out its classic Boeing 707s and 727s. These models were replaced by B737s and Lockheed L-1011 TriStars. The oversize buses planes were commissioned in 1999 alone. Since 2000 the airline has operated under a new company called ‘Linhas Aéreas Charter’ designed to prepare the airline’s corporate identity by changing its name from TAP to ‘TAP Air Portugal’. Early in the 1980s, the airline began to phase out its classic Boeing 707s and 727s. These models were replaced by B737s and Lockheed L-1011 TriStars. The oversize trucks were commissioned in 1999 alone.

In 1995, the year of TAP’s 50th anniversary, a third and fourth A340 went into service. The airline also launched a programme called ‘TAP 2000’ designed to prepare the company for future challenges. One year later, the company’s management decided to purchase two aircraft of the A320 family – an order worth more than 450 million dollars. The airline also purchased an A319/320/321 simulator for its training centre in Lisbon. 1997 turned out to be the first year in a long time that TAP succeeded in making a profit. An eight million dollar surplus appeared on the company’s balance-sheet that year, despite a cumulative loss of 730 million dollars since the early 1990s. TAP continued its restructuring activities until 1998, and proceeded to order additional single-aisle aircraft from Airbus. Six new Airbus planes were commissioned in 1999 alone. In the year 2000, the airline presented its ‘Modernization of the Organization’ Project (MOP), in the course of which the company was split into three business units: Airline, Handling and Maintenance. A new charter company called ‘Linhhas Aéreas Charter’ was created in January 2000 in partnership with the passenger and transport company Viagens Abras. In the same year, TAP reached the five-million passenger mark. Since 2000 the airline has operated under the direction of Fernando Pinto, the former CEO of Varig, the Brazilian carrier. It remains state-owned to this day.

An attempt at privatisation failed in 2001 when one of the partners, SaaGroup, bailed out of the project. However, the new CEO intends to broach the subject more intensively from now on. Several feasibility studies are in progress, and the company currently stands a good chance of finding solvent partners.

Although the airline still made losses of 9.5 million euros in 2005, Pinto expects 2006 to show positive results. A 50 percent growth in revenue and operations over the past five years has attracted several potential investors, and the planned takeover of regional airline Portugalia is on the verge of completion. The deal is due to be signed and sealed before the end of March. Furthermore, the airline has reduced its workforce by ten percent since 2000 to a current level of 5,000. This was mainly achieved by cutting back office jobs. In the case of pilots and aircrews, however, the numbers have increased, and even TAP is not entirely sure how to satisfy the rapidly growing demand for qualified staff in this area.