

JET AIRWAYS

India's Modern Pathfinder

The introduction of India's Air Corporations Act in 1953 forced the nationalisation of all civil airlines. Esteemed pioneers, such as Air India International Ltd and Deccan Airways, were absorbed into two state-owned entities, Air India and Indian Airlines. Air India had been established by the Tata family, which had made its fortune in the industrial sector, and had been crowned the country's international flag carrier. Meanwhile, newly formed Indian Airlines, to which all domestic services were transferred, was considered by many to be ill-suited for the task as it did not have offer a meal service or premium cabin and, more importantly,

The Boeing 737-800 replaced the carrier's original series -300 and -400 examples and now forms the backbone of the Jet Airways fleet. (Airteamimages.com/Dave Sturges)



The Airbus A330-300 is the newest addition to the Jet Airways fleet. The carrier acquired three of an eventual four examples, including VT-JWT (c/n 1370), in December 2012. (Airteamimages.com/Rudi Boigelot)

Raf Jah has witnessed first hand the evolution of the Indian aviation scene over the last 30 years. Here he charts the rise of Jet Airways, the country's largest private airline.

did not operate a sufficient number of flights to meet the growing demand. In fact, it was quite common for fist fights to break out at ticket desks prior to the departure of a popular flight.

For several decades Indian Airlines' dominance of the domestic aviation scene was total and mirrored that of Aeroflot in the Soviet Union. However, with the situation showing little

sign of improving the government announced an open skies policy in 1991, paving the way for private civil operators to launch operations. Many Indian conglomerates, most of them household names, took advantage of the new agreement and jumped into the fray, buying or leasing aircraft to start their own carriers. One of the earliest was East West Airlines, which started operations around India in

1992, acquiring an eventual fleet of eight ageing Boeing 737-200s. It was followed soon after by ModiLuft and NEPC airlines.

Continuing Difficulties

Jet Airways, under the guidance of businessman founder Naresh Goyal, was more circumspect. The company selected the most modern and fuel-efficient aircraft of the day – the 737-

300. This choice gave it a significant advantage over those operating the thirsty 737-200 series. It was with four such examples, leased from Australian carrier Ansett Airways, that it launched services on May 5, 1993.

The deregulation may have changed the law, but it did not alter the attitude of the general public – which favoured the national airlines. During an exchange with an Indian Airlines' >>

Above - Jet underwent a major rebranding in 2007, modifying its original navy and grey livery to incorporate yellow and gold ribbons on the forward fuselage. The Landor Associates-designed colour scheme was unveiled on the carrier's new Boeing 777-300ERs. (Airteamimages.com/Steve Flint)



"THE AIRLINE'S SUCCESS WAS DUE IN PART TO ONE MAJOR FACTOR – ITS LEVEL OF SERVICE."

Jet Airways' Boeing 737s are used to support both the carrier's mainline and low-cost operations. (Airteamimages.com/Andrew Hunt)



It was under the guidance of founder and Chairman Naresh Goyal that Jet Airways selected the fuel-efficient Boeing 737-300 to support its initial operations. (Jet Airways)

Unlike its counterparts, Jet retained key services in-house. It employed scores of ground crew to turn around its aircraft safely and quickly. (Airteamimages.com/Andrew Hunt)

station manager, the author was told explicitly that the newly-launched private airlines would fail. It was not long before the prophecy was at least partially fulfilled.

Sure enough, the carrier's began to collapse and, by early 1997, ModiLuft, NEPC and East West had all been consigned to the history books. Speculation was rife that the authorities were conspiring against the new operators, a theory fuelled in part by the airline companies' own personnel. A NEPC captain told the author that one of its Fokker F27s had flown to New Zealand for maintenance and was then refused re-entry into India. Whatever the reasons for the failures, Jet ploughed on and slowly but surely strengthened its position in the market. In April 1994 it acquired two former

"JET AIRWAYS, UNDER THE CAREFUL GUIDANCE OF BUSINESSMAN NARESH GOYAL, WAS MORE CIRCUMSPECT."

Malaysian Airlines 737-400s, becoming the first in India to fly the type, and its schedule increased to 39 flights per day.

The Halcyon Days

With many of its rivals gone, Mumbai/Chhatrapati Shivaji-based Jet Airways thrived. In December 1996 it became the country's first private carrier to buy new aircraft when it signed a purchase agreement with Boeing for ten more

737s; a mixture of -400s and the Next-Generation -800 models. The airline's success was due in part to one major factor – its level of service. Jet had what no other Indian carrier offered; a choice of onboard meals, its own frequent flyer programme and in-flight shopping via JetMall.

In addition, its aircraft were maintained to the highest standards, flights operated on time and crews were polite and hospitable. Jet also retained some of its key services in-house. With most Indian airports lacking automation, ground operations often demanded a large workforce but, rather than outsource this requirement, the airline hired scores of ground crew to turn around its aircraft quickly and safely. Most significantly, Jet Airways trained its staff at all levels to deliver a quality service. Deprived of this experience for 40 years, the travelling Indian public responded enthusiastically. Aggressive marketing campaigns and an attention to detail won the day. Jet flights were leaving with a full complement of passengers where Indian Airlines, and other lesser-known private carriers, were struggling to fill seats.

With this success came the purchase of new aircraft. Goyal was an excellent negotiator and Boeing came to the table. In October 1998, Jet placed a firm order for ten more Next-Generation 737s, paid for through commercial loans and guarantees from the Export-Import Bank of the United States.

Despite its advances, the Indian aviation industry was still lagging well behind its western counterparts. Even at the turn of the millennium, it was very much dependant upon people booking in person and paying by cash or cheque. Jet Airways, however, soon became the airline of choice for travel agents booking international flights.

Right • The yellow uniform worn by Jet Airways' cabin crew was designed by Roberto Capucci. It was introduced in 2007 as part of a global rebranding exercise. (Jet Airways)



Far Right • The deregulation of the Indian commercial aviation market in 1991 led to a spate of new private carriers, such as Jet Airways and Kingfisher Airlines, launching operations alongside the state-owned Air India and Indian Airlines. (Airteamimages.com/Andrew Hunt)



Passengers were able to travel with just a three to four-hour connection between domestic and international flights. This had been unheard of during the reign of the inherently unreliable Indian Airlines - Jet Airways was transforming domestic civil aviation.

A change in legislation in 2005 meant that domestic carriers which had operated for more than five years could qualify for an international licence.

Jet fulfilled this criterion and was duly licensed to fly beyond India's borders. London was the natural choice for its inaugural

international flight, operated by its newly-acquired Airbus A340-300, and a host of new routes were added soon after.

In 2007 Jet Airways underwent a major rebranding. While the navy and grey livery, accented in yellow and featuring a flying sun logo, was retained, the new Landor Associates-designed colour scheme added yellow and gold ribbons to the forward fuselage. The new look was unveiled officially on the carrier's first 777-300ER, VT-JEA (c/n 35157). This

reinvigorated Jet and international connections to the Arabian Gulf, Hong Kong and Singapore were added. Unusually, it also became the first Indian operator to establish a European hub when in the same year it opened a base in Brussels – it is used as a transit point for transatlantic operations.

On the domestic front, the airline was faced by a different challenge – that of the low-cost airline. Carriers such as Air Deccan had brought the tried and tested no-frills concept

JET AIRWAYS CURRENT FLEET

Type	Number
Airbus A330-200	11
Airbus A330-300	4
ATR 72-500	16
ATR 72-600	2
Boeing 737-700	7
Boeing 737-800	48
Boeing 737-900	2
Boeing 737-900ER	2
Boeing 777-300ER	10





Jet Airways became the first Indian carrier to establish a European hub when it opened a base in Brussels in 2007. (Jet Airways)

apparent that those days were unlikely to return for the foreseeable future. Jet was forced to withdraw its seven newly-purchased 777-300ERs, used to fly non-stop between Bombay and Delhi to New York. The Boeing jets sat idle until Turkish Airlines, going through a period of significant expansion, acquired them. Jet wet-leased two 777s to the Istanbul-based operator initially and it was so enamoured of the aircraft that it took all seven examples, before placing an order for 12 of its own.

Jet's situation grew precarious. Mounting losses led to staff cutbacks and, in 2008 alone, almost 2,000 personnel were laid off. This triggered industrial action and it was only the intervention of the Central Government and Goyal which led to its resolution.

Jet Resurgence

In May 2009, Jet Airways reacted to the growing number of low-cost carriers serving the Indian domestic market by launching a second no-frills brand, JetKonnect. The carrier claimed the move was a means of avoiding the regulatory delays associated with transferring assets to Jetlite. It led >>

Jet's long-haul requirements are met by a mixed fleet of Airbus A330s and Boeing 777s, both of which are pictured here in the carrier's latest livery. (Airteamimages.com/Alex Filippopoulos)

JET AIRWAYS	
IATA	9W
ICAO	JAI
Callsign	JET AIRWAYS
Founded	April 1, 1992
Commenced operations	May 5, 1993
Base	Mumbai
	Bangalore
	Brussels
	Chennai
Hubs	Delhi
	Kolkata
	Pune

to the Indian market. Spotting an opportunity to challenge in the growing sector, Jet acquired Air Sahara for \$340 million. The operator was subsequently remodelled as a full low-cost subsidiary under the name JetLite.

The move was an important one for the airline which had grown into the largest carrier in India by both fleet size and passenger numbers, eclipsing both state-owned operators.

Crisis in India

The financial crisis which gripped the world during early 2008 arrived somewhat later in India.

After more than half a century of being virtually a closed shop, the Indian economy had opened up to the global market and this left it very exposed. The business sector faltered and passengers stopped booking flights. Workers lost their jobs, families lost their

"QUITE SIMPLY, INDIA'S BUSINESS SECTOR FALTERED AND PASSENGERS STOPPED BOOKING FLIGHTS."

Jet's Première (Business) Class features lie-flat seating giving every passenger direct access to the aisle. (Jet Airways)

Above Left - Jet has established a reputation for providing excellent service - passengers travelling in First Class have their own private suite. (Jet Airways)

investments and income and holidays were put on hold. More importantly, business people stayed at home and took advantage of teleconferencing and email and, if they had to travel, they took the train. With the economy in crisis, the once profitable private airlines responded to mounting losses and debt by axing routes, reducing the frequency of flights and phasing out larger aircraft. Jet was not immune to this downturn

in traffic. In 2008 it posted a loss of \$120 million and remained in the red for several more years. The situation changed for the better during early 2012, when it announced a first quarter profit of \$44.5 million. After five consecutive loss-making quarters, the carrier appeared to have turned a corner. Clearly the first decade of the new millennium had been the halcyon days of Indian aviation. It also became





“JET BECAME THE LARGEST CARRIER IN INDIA BY BOTH FLEET SIZE AND PASSENGERS CARRIED.”

Indian operator Air Sahara was acquired by Jet Airways in 2007 for \$340 million. It was remodelled as a low-cost subsidiary and flew under the JetLite brand. (Airteamimages.com/Rudi Boigelot)

Rather than risk regulatory delays by transferring assets to low-cost subsidiary JetLite, Jet Airways elected instead to launch a second no-frills carrier, JetKonnect. The latter utilises ATR 72s from the mainline fleet. (Toulouse Spotting Family/JPYP)

Jet Airways operates eleven Airbus A330-202s, including VT-JWM (c/n 923), on some of its long-haul services. For North American destinations flights are routed via its European hub in Brussels. (Airteamimages.com/Jeroen Hribar)

to passenger confusion as both Jet and JetKonnect utilised the same fleet of aircraft. For example, a 737-800 could fly from Bombay to Hyderabad under the JetKonnect banner, with passengers in Economy Class being charged for onboard refreshments and so on. The same aircraft and crew could then fly on to Delhi as a full-service Jet Airways flight with all the perks that entailed. In fact, for many passengers, the only way to differentiate between the two was the price they paid for their ticket. To Western observers this inconsistency of service delivery, without clear branding, might seem unusual but rising passenger numbers suggest it is a system that works for Jet Airways.



The Future

The carrier has grown significantly since its humble beginnings in 1993. Today, it operates a 100-strong fleet of aircraft to 72 destinations around the Indian subcontinent and on medium- and long-haul international routes.

Jet appears to be far stronger now that it has emerged from its financial difficulties. The economy in India is still damaged; fuel prices remain high and a full recovery is not expected for the foreseeable future. With its domestic network as its mainstay, the carrier's fortunes are tied inexorably to those of

India. While these factors are having an impact on the airline, it is older and wiser and appears to have learnt from past mistakes. It is streamlining its operations, cutting its unprofitable routes and is making smarter decisions for its future aircraft requirements.

It remains to be seen where Jet Airways will go from here. The airline is more than just a survivor of India's ruthless aviation sector. It is a genuine pioneer and, in spite of continuing challenges, will always be the carrier which transformed the country's commercial transport industry. **W/W**

