

The Pride of Africa

Kenya Airways was formed in 1977 and has for many years operated with a relatively low profile. **Raf Jah** examines how the airline has grown into the dominant force in central and southern Africa.

When the word Kenya is mentioned, one could be forgiven for instantly thinking about safaris, lions, and the film *Out of Africa*. Certainly, this is the main driving force behind the country's tourism industry and one that its government recognises as being of vital importance to the nation. Even today, many casual observers dismiss Kenya Airways as merely the bus that delivers tourists for safaris. This assumption could not be further from the truth, with the airline flying more than three million passengers last year alone – many of

them Africans from outside of Kenya. The carrier has quietly grown to become one of the strongest on the continent, and with Kenya being uniquely placed a mere five hours' flying time from the major African cities of Cape Town to the South, Lagos to the West and Cairo to the North, the airline is able to operate an extensive regional network.

History

Kenya Airways can trace its origins back to July 1929 when Florence Kerr Wilson, the widow of an expatriate farmer, began

flying passengers around the British Colony using a de Havilland Gypsy Moth. With the assistance of the famous aviator Thomas Campbell-Black, Wilson Airways grew steadily, adding a variety of aircraft to its fleet until operations were curtailed by the outbreak of World War Two. Following the end of hostilities, the small airline failed to resume services in its own right, being absorbed instead into East African Airways, the newly established

flag carrier of the colonies of Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika and Zanzibar (the latter two now being part of Tanzania). The airline enjoyed initial success, operating jet aircraft, including the Comet 4 and the Vickers Super VC-10, but as Britain moved to disengage from its African colonies during the early 1960s, the newly independent nations were unable to cope with the demands of running an international airline. Financial difficulties in Uganda, and Tanzania in particular, placed impossible demands upon the carrier and led to a deterioration of relations between the three countries that ran the airline, ultimately driving East African Airways into liquidation in January 1977. With the Kenyan tourism industry in full swing, the country had a >>

Four Boeing 777-200ERs form the backbone of Kenya Airways' long-haul fleet. The type will be supplemented in late 2013 by two of the larger -300ER series, while the 787 Dreamliner is planned for delivery early the following year. (Airteamimages.com/Tim De Groot)

"CONSIDER WHAT BRITISH AIRWAYS DOES FOR THE UK - THAT IS WHAT I WANT KENYA AIRWAYS TO DO FOR AFRICA."

Dr Taitus Naikuni, CEO of Kenya Airways



East African Airways was the flag carrier of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, operating a variety of jets including this Vickers Super VC-10, 5H-MOG (c/n 885). Its failure in January 1977 led directly to the formation of Kenya Airways. (Airteamimages.com/ Carl Ford)

Above right - Kenya Airways took delivery of three former Northwest Orient Boeing 707-351Bs, including 5Y-BBI (c/n 19634), in late 1977. (Airteamimages.com/ Carl Ford)

Right - The Kenyan flag carrier became the first in Africa to operate the Airbus A310 when it received its maiden aircraft in 1985. (Airteamimages.com/ Keith Blincow)

requirement for direct air services but didn't have an airline to operate them. The republic's government intervened, acquiring some of the personnel and assets of the former flag carrier to establish its own national airline, Kenya Airways. However, the introduction of a new operator was not without its difficulties, it having an initial fleet of just four aircraft; two Fokker F27 turboprops and a pair of Douglas DC-9s, all inherited from East African Airways. By the time the airline launched services on February 4, 1977, it had added two Boeing 707-321s on wet-lease from British Midland, and these were supplemented later the same year by three former Northwest Orient examples.

The Kenyan carrier remains proud of its association with East African Airways, despite the latter's relatively turbulent demise. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that the airline's headquarters occupy the same, modest building as its predecessor, while a 707 tail fin emblazoned with the colours of both



carriers guards the gates of what Kenya Airways calls its KQ Base (KQ being the operator's IATA code).

Journey into Privatisation

The airline continued to grow during the following decade and in October 1985 it acquired one of an eventual six Airbus A310s (including one leased example), becoming the first African carrier to operate the type. Its ageing DC-9s were phased out in favour of 737s and by the mid-1990s, Kenya Airways was able to operate services from points as far apart as Bombay, India to the Nigeria capital of Lagos and Johannesburg, South Africa to London, UK. This was in addition to a respectable intra-African network.

KENYA AIRWAYS - CURRENT FLEET	
Type	Number
Boeing 737-300	6
Boeing 737-700	4
Boeing 737-800	5
Boeing 767-300	6
Boeing 777-200ER	4
Embraer 170LR	5
Embraer 190AR	7

The Kenyan Government had expressed an interest in selling part of its stake in the national carrier as early as 1986, though this did not happen until 1995. The airline began the privatisation process early the following year under the stewardship of new CEO Brian Presbury, with the government retaining a 29.8% stake in the operator, while KLM acquired a 26.73% share, forming a bond between the two which has remained in place ever since. The Dutch national carrier brought with it a new level of cooperation, combining Kenya

Airways' Msafiri frequent flyer programme with its own Flying Dutchman scheme.

It was also under KLM's guidance that the Kenyan airline switched its Airbus

Bottom - Dutch carrier KLM assisted Kenya Airways with its recent fleet renewal programme which included exchanging its ageing Boeing 737-200 and -300 series with Next Generation models including this 737-8AL, 5Y-KYA (c/n 35069).

Kenya Airways is able to perform maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) work on its fleet of Boeing and Embraer aircraft at its large engineering facility at Nairobi/Jomo Kenyatta.

jets for 767-300s, adding its larger sibling, the 777-200ER, some years later. This fleet renewal programme was also extended to the airline's shorter-haul aircraft, replacing early 737-200 and -300 series with the latest Next Generation models which were supplemented in 2010 by the Embraer 190 (See panel).

In 2002, the Kenyan national carrier transported almost 1.54 million tonnes of freight - no mean feat for what was still a relatively small airline. However, the airline's board was keen to improve this further and appointed Dr Taitus Naikuni as the new CEO in February 2003. A Kenyan technocrat, he was a member of the World Bank-sponsored 'Dream Team', engaged by the government to turn around the



KENYA AIRWAYS HISTORIC TYPES

- Airbus A310
- Boeing 707
- Boeing 737-200
- Boeing 720
- Boeing 757
- Douglas DC-8
- Douglas DC-9
- Fokker 50
- Fokker F27
- Saab 340

"AFRICA HAS LOOKED NORTH FOR FAR TOO LONG. WE NEED TO BEND OUR NECKS AND LOOK EAST."

Dr Taitus Naikuni, CEO of Kenya Airways



Kenyan technocrat Dr Taitus Naikuni held several noteworthy positions before joining the airline as CEO in 2003, including permanent secretary to the Minister of Transport and Managing Director of the Magadi Soda Company. He was also a member of the World Bank-sponsored 'Dream Team', engaged by the government to turn around the country's economy.

Kenya Airways' short-haul fleet was supplemented in 2010 by the Embraer 190. (Embraer)

An E-Jet Milestone

Kenya Airways increased its fleet of Embraer E-Jets to 13 examples when it received E190, 5Y-FFC (c/n 19000577), on October 10. More significantly, it was the Brazilian manufacturer's 900th example.

"The delivery of the 900th E-Jet is a great achievement for Embraer, and we are very pleased to deliver this aircraft to Kenya Airways, one of Africa's leading airlines," said Paulo Cesar Silva, Embraer President, Commercial Aviation.

The E-Jet, which has been in use with the carrier since 2007, forms part of the airline's ongoing fleet renewal programme with the larger E190 being configured in a two-class, 96 seat layout.

Kenya Airways has a further seven examples on order and is expecting a delivery each month until February 2013.

"It is a real honour to be part of this highlight in Embraer's history, by receiving the 900th E-Jet," said Dr. Titus Naikuni, CEO of Kenya Airways. "The E190 is a versatile aircraft suited to our growth ambitions on the African continent. Given its mid-range capabilities, it ably supports our plans to fly new routes and increase frequencies on existing ones. It affords our passengers excellent cabin comfort while enhancing operating efficiency." (Photo Embraer)



country's economy. He had held a host of positions, including permanent secretary to the Minister of Transport and Managing Director of the Magadi Soda Company. With a remit to build on the successful privatisation and expand the airline further, Naikuni embarked on a new strategy that led to the re-introduction of Kenya Airways Cargo as a standalone brand, while regional subsidiary Kenya Flamingo – which had been established in 2000 to operate regional services from Nairobi – was re-absorbed into the mainline

carrier. A host of new routes were launched to cities including Bamako, Mali, the Senegalese capital Dakar and Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The carrier also made moves to improve its standing

KENYA AIRWAYS - CODESHARE PARTNERS	
Carrier	Routes
Aeroflot	Nairobi – Dubai – Moscow
Air Botswana	Nairobi – Gaborone – Harare
Air France	Various
Air Mauritius	Nairobi – Port Louis
Air Mozambique	Nairobi – Maputo, Porto Amélia
Alitalia	Nairobi – Rome, Milan, Mombasa
China Southern	Nairobi – Dubai – Guangzhou, Beijing
Jet Airways	Nairobi – Mumbai – Dhaka
KLM	Various
Korean Air	Nairobi – Bangkok – Seoul
Precision Air	Various
Qantas	Nairobi – Bangkok – Sydney
TAAG-Angola Airlines	Nairobi – Luanda

outside of Africa and became the first sub-Saharan operator to pass the International Air Transport Association's (IATA) Operational Safety Audit in 2005. Barely two years later, Kenya Airways was officially welcomed as an associate airline of the SkyTeam alliance, this being upgraded to a full membership in June 2010.

Speaking with *Airliner World*, Naikuni explained the challenges he faced when he took over the airline. "It was built on a solid foundation – the main goal had been privatisation and this had

Under Project Mawingu, Kenya Airways plans to increase its network to 115 destinations over the next decade while also expanding its fleet to 100 aircraft.

Above left - Kenya Airways' livery and cabin crew uniforms are both heavily influenced by the red, black and green colours of the national flag. (All photos author unless stated)





The Kenyan carrier flies a leased Martinair Boeing 747-412(BCF), PH-MPS (c/n 24066), under the Kenya Airways Cargo/Safari Connection banner. (Airteamimages.com/Colin Parker)

Below left - Now known as its KO Base (KO being the carrier's IATA code), Kenya Airways' headquarters occupy the same building used by its predecessor, East African Airways.

The airline introduced a revised livery in 2005, replacing the traditional 'KA' initials with a stylised 'KQ' logo.

Kenya Airways ordered nine aircraft Boeing 787 Dreamliners in 2006 and is planning to receive its first examples in 2014. The jet will replace the carrier's 767-300s and is expected to deliver substantial fuel savings. (Boeing)

capacity to nine million passengers per year. A more fundamental problem for the airline is a lack of qualified aircrew to operate its expanding fleet. "The [Kenya Airline] Pilots Association refuses to employ expatriate pilots but we desperately need more crews - there are simply not enough [trained] Kenyan nationals to do the job," Naikuni explained. "We currently send our pilots to South Africa for training and have a long-term plan to create our own flight academy here, but in the short term we need more crews to support our expansion - if we don't do it, someone else will."

Moving Forward

The Kenyan carrier has a significant back order for new aircraft including nine General Electric GEnx-powered 787-8 Dreamliners (plus options for a further four). "The Dreamliner will revolutionise our business," Naikuni remarked. "Can you imagine 20% fuel savings on every flight? Fuel is one of our largest expenditures."

The carrier will also take delivery of two 777-300ERs in late 2013 and hopes to increase its fleet to 100 aircraft by 2022. "This expansion, along with our new terminal at Jomo Kenyatta and our new routes to China, India and the US, will enable us to consolidate our position in Africa."

Kenya Airways has become a dominant force in central and southern Africa, and Naikuni is confident that the carrier can have a positive impact not just on the aviation industry but on the whole continent. "Tourism is a national asset, it builds economies, and airlines are a key part of that process. Look at how Singapore and Dubai have been radically affected by a single airline. Consider what British Airways does for the UK - that is what I want Kenya Airways to do for Africa." **EW**

Right - Under the stewardship of CEO Taitus Naikuni, Kenya Airways has grown into the dominant force in central and southern Africa, more than doubling its passenger traffic over the last ten years.

been achieved admirably but I found the guys in a comfort zone. When I took over, I realised fairly quickly that we could not go up to Europe and take on the big boys. We had to have a major shift in strategy, and that was to build and consolidate our regional network. The focus had to be on Africa - two years ago we had 32 destinations but have now increased this to 47, and we are not stopping there."

The impact of Naikuni's strategy was immediate - by 2007, passenger numbers had increased to 2.6 million, while air freight had risen to almost 61,000 tonnes, these figures swelling to a remarkable 3.64 million and 539,000 tonnes respectively by 2011. It is on the back of this success that the airline has launched its most ambitious expansion plan to date - Project Mawingu (derived from the Swahili word

Aircraft of Kenya Airways dominate the busy ramp at Nairobi/Jomo Kenyatta, particularly during the early morning and late afternoon.



for clouds), which calls for the carrier to operate to more destinations and with higher frequency over the next decade. Significantly, the continuous high growth of air traffic on the continent means that Kenya Airways increasing its network from 55 to 115 points is more a reflection of the growing importance of African carriers on the world stage rather than overly enthusiastic planning.

Over the next five years, Naikuni has reaffirmed plans to increase Kenya Airways' presence in the key markets of China and India. "We're planning to fly to Ahmedabad [in Gujarat, India]. A passenger travelling from Dar es Salaam currently flies five and a half hours to the Gulf, has a five-hour layover and then has to fly a further three hours to India. If he transits via Nairobi instead, it's a shorter flight time and a shorter layover - we're saving the



"Africa has looked north for far too long. We need to bend our necks and look east." The carrier will, however, continue to benefit from the close relationship it has with its SkyTeam partners, with Naikuni highlighting the excellent connections the alliance has across Europe, particularly to Paris



and Amsterdam.

Despite its recent success, Kenya Airways faces several major challenges in the coming years. In particular, its Nairobi/Jomo Kenyatta base is too small to cope with the carrier's ambitious expansion plans, despite significant investment which will increase its



"DESPITE ITS RECENT SUCCESS, KENYA AIRWAYS FACES SEVERAL MAJOR CHALLENGES IN THE COMING YEARS."

client six hours in travelling time. This will enable us to compete effectively with the likes of [Dubai-based carrier] Emirates [Airline]."

It is with this factor in mind that Kenya Airways is carefully planning its future network, Naikuni noting that the airline will look to open up routes into Northern Africa now that the region is more politically stable. He added that demand lies not in the traditional European market but rather in Asia.

