

# A Central Asian Leader

As Uzbekistan Airways celebrates its 20th anniversary of operations, **Raf Jah** outlines the company's creation and the progress it has made in becoming Central Asia's largest carrier.



The first Boeing 767-333ER (ER) to enter service with Uzbekistan Airways was delivered on November 27, 1998. The aircraft, VP-BUA (c/n 28370), is seen here on final approach to London/Heathrow. It was re-registered UK67001 in November 2009. (Airteamimages.com/Jason Taperell)

**“WITH THE LACK OF A SEAPORT, UZBEKISTAN IS COMPLETELY LAND-LOCKED, SO THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL AIRLINE WAS CLEARLY DEFINED.”**

Merely saying the names ‘Samarkand’ (Uzbekistan’s third-largest city) or ‘Bukhara’ (its fifth city) conjures up images of the trans-Eurasia Silk Road, steeped in history and adventure. Once powerful ‘khanates’ or mini kingdoms, both these walled cities now sit peacefully within the Republic of Uzbekistan and are served on a twice-daily basis by Airbus airliners of the national carrier, Uzbekistan Airways. The nation’s recent history saw it incorporated into the Russian Empire during the 19th century and become a full Republic of the Soviet Union in 1924. After the USSR’s collapse many of its former republics became independent nations in their own right.

Uzbekistan gained its independence on August 31, 1991. It faced many challenges, not least in the aviation sector where the once all-encompassing

state-owned carrier, Aeroflot, had dominated. As the Russian carrier retreated to its home hubs it abandoned much of its fleet, providing the newly independent nations with the necessary equipment to establish their own airlines. In Uzbekistan, Tashkent, the capital city, was an Aeroflot regional hub as well as being an essential refuelling point for aircraft flying between Europe and Asia. Although the country lacks its own oil deposits, it was and still is the cultural heart of Central Asia.

Uzbekistan initially found its newly-gained independence a difficult step forward: its population is a mix of

Pictured during a pre-delivery flight at Airbus’ Finkenwerder, Hamburg, facility on July 13, 2010 is the first Airbus A320-214 for Uzbekistan Airways. It is wearing its test registration, D-AVVA, and construction number 4371, but was re-registered UK32011 when it was handed over to the carrier two days later. (Airteamimages.com/HAMFive)

native Uzbeks, Russians, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Karakalpaks and Tatars. Many Uzbeks working in Russia wished to remain Uzbek, while Russians living in the central Asian country chose to stay and become Uzbek citizens. This resulted in huge numbers of people wishing to travel to visit friends and relatives in their respective countries. The requirement for suitable and sustainable transportation was immediate. Uzbekistan is completely land-locked so the need for a national airline was clearly defined. On January 28, 1992 the former Tashkent division of Aeroflot was handed over to Uzbekistan Havo Yolari,

otherwise known as the Uzbekistan Airways National Air Company (NAC). It was to be another four months before the new carrier launched its maiden service, between Tashkent and London, using a former Aeroflot Ilyushin Il-62.

## The First Decade

Uzbekistan Airways quickly expanded its international network adding rotations to Moscow, St Petersburg, Tel Aviv, Delhi, Bangkok and Istanbul. During the 1990s it changed its business model, becoming a long-haul budget carrier linking destinations in Asia with London. Passengers who could not afford the regular fares of the mainline operators chose the Uzbek carrier instead. London to Delhi via Tashkent became a popular route for British backpackers and Indian tourists alike. Tashkent’s location – six-and-a-half >>



hours from London, four from Delhi and six from Bangkok – made it an obvious stopping-point to break the journey.

However, a Soviet-era ethos of poor service dogged the company which struggled to maintain internationally accepted standards. The author travelled to Uzbekistan in 1994 and flew on both a Yakovlev Yak-40 and an Antonov An-24. On the longest domestic flight, between Urgench and Tashkent, he was told in Russian to fasten his seatbelt and offered a small apple as the onboard meal. Something had to give, as Arslan Rumeto, the General Director of Uzbekistan Airways recently commented: “It was simply impossible to enter the international market with the Tupolev Tu-154 and Il-62 aircraft, both of which had a bad public image abroad.”

The decision to acquire Western-built airliners was the first important step taken in upgrading what was, essentially, a former Soviet carrier. In 1993, only a year after its inception, it acquired two Airbus A310s. These had originally been built for Pan American World Airways (Pan Am) but were not delivered and, after two-year leases to Ecuatoriana of Ecuador, both F-OGQY (c/n 574) and F-OGQZ (c/n 576) were leased to Uzbekistan Airways by Widebody Finance. By 1995, however, the carrier had realised that to serve long-haul destinations successfully it would require longer-range airliners. So on October 20, it signed a contract with Boeing, ordering two 767-300ERs (extended range) and a single 757-200 in a deal valued at \$258 million. The first 767-33P(ER), VP-BUA (c/n 28370), was delivered just over a year later.

Boris Besedin, Deputy Director General of Uzbekistan Airways speaking in 1998 about the carrier's investment in Western-built airliners said: “The major weakness of Soviet-built aeroplanes was their low fuel efficiency. Had we not bought Western aircraft, we would now be paying much more for our fuel. With the same number of seats, the 757 consumes three tonnes of JetA1 fuel per



Pictured at Tashkent's Terminal 3 are a single Airbus A320 and three Ilyushin Il-114s of the national carrier; the turboprops are used on domestic services.



Parked on the ramp at Maastricht, Netherlands, is this Ilyushin Il-76TD, UK76449 (c/n 1023403058), of Uzbekistan Airways. (Airteamimages.com/Wolfgang Mendorf)

**“IT WAS SIMPLY IMPOSSIBLE TO ENTER THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET WITH THE TUPOLEV TU-154 AND IL-62 AIRCRAFT, BOTH OF WHICH HAD A BAD PUBLIC IMAGE ABROAD.”**

Arslan Ruzmetov, former Director General of Uzbekistan Airways

hour, compared to the more than five tonnes used by the Tu-154.” Such large differences can be a major factor in an airline's survival.

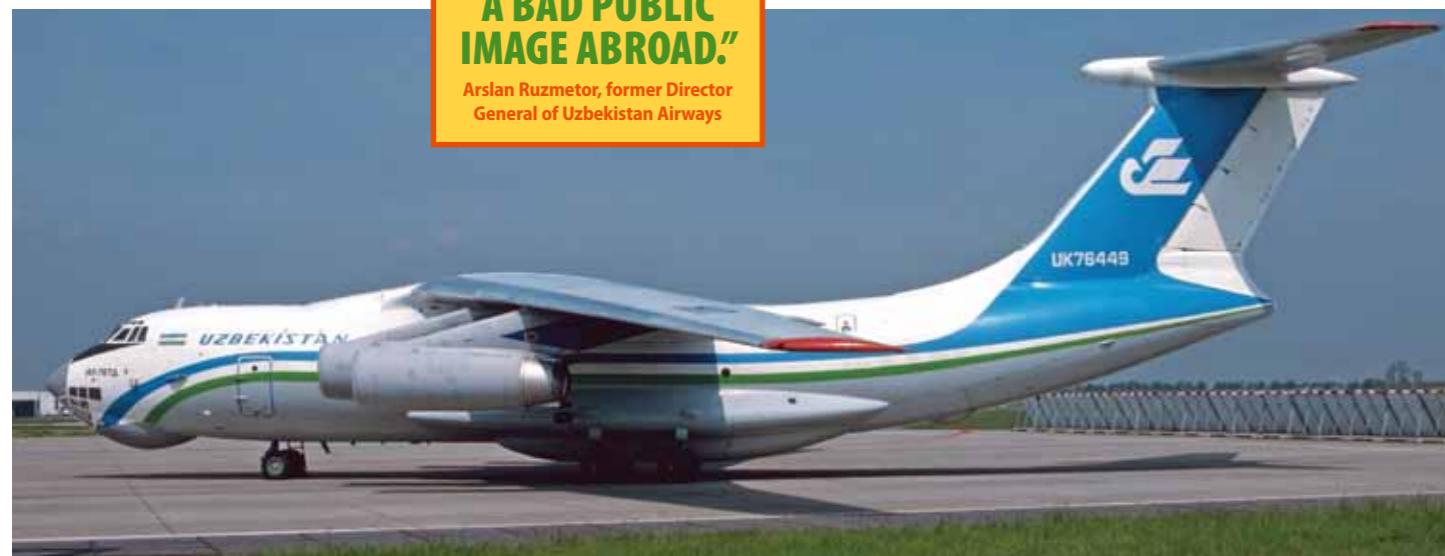
In the early 2000s, the company upgraded its services and training. It started by opening its own aircrew training college and expanded its network to include New York via Riga as well as flying to Tokyo, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok, while services to Amritsar linked the Punjab with London.

#### Current Operations

The airline believes that its greatest achievement during this period was

the replacement of its entire Tu-154 fleet by A320s. It signed a deal for six examples on June 28, 2007, adding a further four orders in December 2008. Uzbekistan Airways' first A320, UK32011 (c/n 4371), was handed over on July 16, 2010 and entered service between Tashkent and Baku three days later. A further five examples followed before the end of that year, and the tenth and final aircraft, UK32020 (c/n 4852), was handed over at the end of November 2011. The A320s are configured in a two-class, 150-seat layout with 12 Business Class seats and 138 in Economy.

The upgrading of the fleet is certainly paying off. During his research the author travelled on one of the company's comfortable A320s – and, 18 years since he last flew with the airline, the experience was a vast improvement, with



eastern hospitality from a multilingual, multi-ethnic crew, both on the ground and in the air, all demonstrating standards of professionalism that passengers expect to find when flying with an international airline. The turnaround in the carrier's fortunes is also reflected in the numbers of passengers it is now carrying – in 1993

the figure was 900,000; by 2011 it had grown to 2,230,000 (an increase of 14% over 2010). Most Uzbekistan Airways traffic is point-to-point and at present, transit passengers only account for 18%.

The carrier has worked hard to establish itself in the market, albeit from a small, lesser-known hub – now it believes it is ready for the next step, joining

Uzbekistan Airways operates two Airbus A330B4-622R Freighters under a lease agreement from Korean Air including this example, UK31004 (c/n 717), which has been with the Uzbek carrier since June 2009. (Airteamimages.com/TT)

The author travelled on one of the company's A320s – and, 18 years on, the experience was a vast improvement, with eastern hospitality from a multilingual, multi-ethnic crew, both on the ground and in the air. (All images the author unless stated)



Taken on an earlier visit to Uzbekistan in 1994, this is one of the carrier's former Russian-built Yakovlev Yak-40s, UK87263 (c/n 9311926) which is pictured on the ramp at Tashkent International Airport.

a global airline alliance. Under the sponsorship and stewardship of Korean Air, the carrier has applied to become an associate member of SkyTeam. The company reports: “We are in the process of fulfilling SkyTeam's membership requirements.” The process was started in May 2008 and although much progress has been made there still is no definitive date when Uzbekistan Airways will be accepted into the group.

It now operates a predominately Western-built fleet, although it also uses five Il-114 turboprops on its domestic rotations. However, a glance around the aprons of Tashkent International Airport reveals scores of Russian-built aircraft that used to be operated by the carrier that are now in storage, including An-24s, Tu-154s and Il-76 transports.

In February this year, Uzbekistan Airways took delivery of two 767-300ERs, the first of which was flown non-stop from Seattle to Tashkent in 14 hours and 30 minutes, the flight coinciding with the airline's 20th anniversary. The second delivery was even quicker at 12 hours and 30 minutes. Both flights were also important for Boeing as company representatives from its Fuel Mileage Aerodynamics Engineering Department >>





Tupolev Tu-154M, UK85776 (c/n 93A-958), is seen on final approach into Moscow/Domodedovo International Airport in 2010. The type was replaced following the arrival of the carrier's first Airbus A320s. (Airteamimages.com/HAMFive)

Bottom - Parked on one of Tashkent Airport's ramps is this group of Soviet-built aircraft, including nine Ilyushin Il-76TDs and two Tupolev Tu-154s. It's difficult to ascertain which of these jets are stored and which remain active.

**UZBEKISTAN AIRWAYS CURRENT FLEET LIST (HY/UZB)**

Type	Reg	C/n	Delivery Date	Notes
Airbus A300B4-622R (F)	UK31004	717	Jun-09	Leased from Korean Air
	UK31005	722	Apr-09	Leased from Korean Air
Airbus A310-324	UK31001	574	Jun-93	Tashkent Stored
	UK31002	576	Jul-93	Fergana
	UK31003	706	Jun-98	Bukhara
	UK32000	4528	Dec-10	
Airbus A320-214	UK32011	4371	Jul-10	
	UK32012	4395	Aug-10	
	UK32014	4417	Dec-10	
	UK32015	4485	Dec-10	
	UK32016	4492	Dec-10	
	UK32017	4651	Apr-11	
	UK32018	4724	May-11	
	UK32019	4770	Jul-11	
	UK32020	4952	Nov-11	
	BAE Systems Avro RJ85	UK80001	E2312	Dec-97
UK80002		E2309	Jul-97	
UK80003		E2319	Dec-97	
Boeing 757-23P	UK75700	28338	Oct-96	Operated for Government of Uzbekistan
Boeing 757-23P	UK75701	30060	Sep-99	Urgench
	UK75702	30061	Mar-12	Shahrisabz
Boeing 757-231	VP-BUH	30339	Sep-04	Leased from Boeing Capital
	VP-BUI	28487	Oct-04	Leased from Pegasus Aviation
	VP-BUJ	28488	Oct-04	Leased from Pegasus Aviation
	UK67000	35796	Aug-07	Operated for Government of Uzbekistan
Boeing 767-33P (ER)	UK67001	28370	Nov-96	Samarkand
	UK67002	28392	Mar-97	Khiva
	UK67003	40534	Feb-12	
	UK67004	40536	Feb-12	
	VP-BUF	33078	Dec-04	
	UK		due 2014	
Boeing 767-3CB (ER)	VP-BUE	33469	Oct-03	Leased from Tashkent Leasing Ltd
	UK		due 2016	
Boeing 787-83P	UK		due 2016	
	UK		due 2016	
Ilyushin Il-114-100	UK91102	2063800202	Jan-00	
	UK91104	2063800204	Nov-09	
	UK91105	2063800205	Aug-08	
	UK91106	2063800206	Feb-09	
	UK91107	2063800207	Jul-10	

were on board recording performance data which will be used in the future development of its products. The final two 767-300ERs from its 2008 order will be delivered in 2014, while two 787-8s ordered at the same time are expected to arrive during 2016.

In addition to its flying activities Uzbekistan Airways has established a maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) facility at its Tashkent base. The enterprise carries out all types of line and base technical services across its fleet and is expanding to offer similar services to third parties.

As a land-locked nation, cargo traffic is extremely important to Uzbekistan, and the airline flies two A300-600 Freighters leased from Korean Air as well as several of Il-76s (the exact number is subject to speculation). In 2011 it carried 47,000 tonnes of cargo in the freighters as well as in the belly-holds of its passenger jets.

**“MOST OF UZBEKISTAN AIRWAYS TRAFFIC IS ‘POINT-TO-POINT’ AND TRANSIT PASSENGERS ONLY ACCOUNT FOR 18%.”**

But this could be seen as an incomplete figure, as much of Uzbekistan Airways' inbound traffic comprises 'suitcase traders' who will carrier 220-440lb (100-200kg) of personal baggage for trading purposes. Such trading is extremely lucrative for the airline, as the rate paid for excess baggage is much higher than that of booked cargo. The arrivals hall at Tashkent International Airport



is specially set up to accommodate the traders with banks of X-ray machines and teams of customs officers to assess goods coming in and levy duties.

Tashkent International Airport's Terminal 2 was completely refurbished between 1994 and 1998.

Uzbekistan Airways operates two Boeing 757-231s under lease from Pegasus Aviation including this example, VP-BUJ (c/n 28488). (Airteamimages.com/HAMFive)

international facility, was refurbished between 1994 and 1998 with new arrivals and departure halls. The check-in area was also modernised and a comfortable departure area with duty-free shopping was installed within the old building's shell. The airport's two runways were also upgraded and equipped for Cat II and Cat I landings. However, during peak hours the airport is now struggling to cope

with the numbers of passengers passing through it, and facilities for transit passengers are now very limited. Uzbekistan Airways, which owns and runs eleven of the airports throughout the country, is unequivocal about meeting the future needs of its passengers: "We plan to build a new terminal," a company spokesperson confirmed, although no plans or

**Challenges Ahead**  
Like many airlines experiencing rapid growth, success often manifests itself in overcrowding at the carrier's hub facility. Tashkent's Terminal 2, the



timescales have been announced as yet.

The greatest problem the airline faces today is the volatility in the price of aviation fuel, while Uzbekistan is facing the challenge of moving from a command economy to that of a free market. These fundamental changes present it with infrastructure issues that have been compounded by both the success of the national carrier as well as the increase in the number of international airlines now serving Tashkent. But there is now a better understanding of what is required and airline executives are working with colleagues from the airport and the nation's tourism industry to help solve the problems with a view to providing the same seamless travel experience

**“THE AIRLINE’S MAIN PRIORITY IS TO MAINTAIN THE HIGHEST SAFETY, RELIABILITY AND QUALITY OF STANDARDS.”**

Uzbekistan Airways' Director General, Valeriy Tyan

travellers find in other countries.

Uzbekistan Airways' Director General, Valeriy Tyan, recently said that the airline's main priority was "to maintain the highest safety, reliability and quality of standards". During its 20-year existence it's made a quantum leap from being a branch of the Soviet national carrier to an internationally respected company. It has continued to steadily grow its fleet, network and passenger numbers despite the continued global economic downturn and fuel price volatility. Uzbekistan Airways is undoubtedly one of Central Asia's leading carriers – it will be interesting to watch how it grows over the next decade. **W**

Passengers disembarking from Uzbekistan Airways Airbus A320-214, UK32018 (c/n 4724), at Urgench Airport in western Uzbekistan.



The Ilyushin Il-114 is the only Russian-built airliner operating commercial passenger flights with Uzbekistan Airways.



Departing from Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, on a flight back to its Tashkent base is this Uzbekistan Airways Airbus A310-324, UK31003 (c/n 706) Bukhara. (Airteamimages.com/HAMFive)

