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AVIATION IN WEST AFRICA

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What goes up, must come down, and in West Africa that applies not only to planes, but also to entire airlines!

Here in Nigeria, as if we didn't have enough problems, with the economy in recession since the beginning of last year, the currency in freefall and a drastic shortage of foreign exchange, the aviation industry has been experiencing extreme turbulence, as the former leaders in the industry, Aero and Arik, have become shadows of their former selves

In my experience, Arik was never terribly reliable, with delays and cancellations the norm. On board, everything was fine, with a relatively new fleet (not Bulgarian cast-offs, unlike those of another airline which is no more!), but you were never sure whether your flight would leave on time, or at all. Then, in September 2016, the airline shut down completely for about 24 hours due, we were told, to "temporary disruption pending approval of aircraft documentation related to insurance renewal". That, presumably, means they hadn't paid the premiums! Delays and cancellations got worse, and in early February the airline was taken over by AMCON, the government-owned "bad bank" to prevent, apparently, a total collapse. Will State ownership make any difference? I doubt it, governments the world over have proved time and time again that they can't run airlines.

This is all connected. The shortage of foreign exchange means that the airlines struggle to pay for aviation fuel which, when it is available (and yes, Nigeria still experiences fuel shortages), has to be paid for in dollars, and forex is also needed to pay for insurance (written overseas) and for their safety checks, which are carried out abroad because Nigeria doesn't have the facilities in-country. Arik is still flying, but with a drastically reduced fleet and network – a few days after the AMCON takeover, their London and Johannesburg flights were suspended.

Aero has also had problems. Once the airline of choice, it shut down completely in August last year, due also to foreign exchange shortages, but were able to start up again in December, flying just on two domestic routes.



Talking of which, Abuja airport was closed in early March for runway repairs. Yes, you heard that correctly, Abuja, airport, closed. The capital of Nigeria has no airport. They say the closure is for 6 weeks (shall we believe them), and in the meantime we can fly instead to Kaduna, at least 2 hours' by (bad and dangerous) road north of Abuja. According to press reports, it will be OK to fly to Kaduna because renovation of the terminal there is "almost ready". Not surprisingly, the likes of BA, Turkish, Lufthansa and SAA have refused to fly to an airport which is "almost ready", so Abuja is "cut off". Emirates and Kenya Airways had already pulled out of their Abuja routes in October, and Emirates reduced their Lagos service from twice daily to one a day. United and Iberia both stopped flying to Lagos last year.

So where does that leave us? Well, it is not all doom and gloom, there are still domestic airlines such as Air Peace, Med-View and Dana which are reasonably reliable. Med-View fly to London from Lagos, and have recently extended their regional network to Monrovia. But increasingly, we are hubbing through Lomé and Abidjan, using Asky and Air Cote d'Ivoire, respectively, to move around the region, which they do comprehensively and well. On the Accra route, once served by at least four Nigerian airlines, there's Africa World Airlines, a Ghana-China joint venture, with four flights daily. Arik still fly regionally, but their on-line and voice systems don't currently work, and the only way to book with them is at the airport itself. I have searched in vain for their flights on OTAs such as Opodo. This doesn't instill too much confidence, does it?

As for the airport infrastructure in West Africa, it really is creaking at the seams, mostly due to increased passenger numbers. Take Lomé, for example – before Asky started flying from there in 2010 (now to 20 regional cities), Lomé had just a couple of daily flights. Today, when you land at Lomé-Tokoin airport, there are Asky planes stretched out in both directions almost as far as you can see! Consequently, the airport was struggling to cope, especially as the majority of traffic carried by Asky is in transit, but the new terminal has taken the strain quite well. And every time I have been in transit through Lomé, the system has worked really well, sometimes if you are short of time there's a guy waiting for you on arrival at the terminal with your boarding pass in hand, and shooing you through security to catch your next flight!

Abidjan's terminal is also coping well, with decent transit and departure facilities. I wish the same could be said for the facilities at most airports in Nigeria, where renovations have dragged on for years (during which we were obliged to walk through mud – yes, mud – to get in and out of the terminals), and one wonders whether new terminals in Lagos and Abuja will ever be finished. At peak times Lagos can be chaos in both directions, the air conditioning doesn't work, the system is illogical, tempers fray.....

New airports are mooted for Accra and Lagos. Accra has also experienced congestion, and work on Terminal 3, with a capacity of 5 million passengers, commenced early last year. Whether that means the planned new airport at Prampram, to the east of the city, will ever be realized, remains to be seen. Lagos' new airport is planned for the Lekki Free Zone, on the Lekki peninsula, but efforts to attract investors have so far not borne fruit.



Elsewhere in West Africa, Dakar's new airport, Aéroport International Blaise Diagne, is anticipated to open in December 2017, also relieving congestion at the existing airport in the Yoff district. Like many airports in West Africa, the existing airport in Dakar was once outside the city, but is now within the built-up area, and one reason for moving it is safety concerns. The opening date is 6 years delayed, but at least this is one new airport in the region that is actually happening. In Ouagadougou, a new airport is planned, also to replace an old facility in the city itself.

More airports are needed but my goodness they're expensive – the estimate for Dakar is €460 million, it's much the same for the new Lagos airport and Ouagadougou is estimated at almost €600 million. I reckon we're going to have to put up with crowded airport facilities for some time to come.

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