



Air India on long haul to restoring lost reputation

When Tata bought Air India in 2022 it hired aviation veteran Campbell Wilson to lure back the many travellers it had lost during its long decline. His revival drive has seen the fleet expanded, new routes opened and services refined. It is a story in sync with Narendra Modi's triumphalist narrative of a rising India shedding its past. But for some, change is not fast enough, with critics revelling in persistent mishaps, from lost bags to poor food and emergency landings.

Flag carrier's 'mission' - NICE

Air India chief hails progress in flag carrier's 'mission' of revival

Tata-owned group's overhaul is in sync with Modi's vision for country but critics want faster change

JOHN REED — GURUGRAM, INDIA

The chief executive of Air India has acclaimed the carrier's progress in an ambitious turnaround under its Tata Group owner, while acknowledging the challenge of restoring the reputation of the former state-owned national carrier that Indians love to complain about.

Campbell Wilson, the Singapore Airlines chief after Tata bought Air India in 2022, is taking the airline's offering to modernise its fleet as it attracts some of the customers from Gulf or other foreign

...ing and a curse to carrier," the New Zealand Financial Times in an article from India's headquarters. "There is a lot of love and respect, and there is a lot of hope for the better or worse."

"It's just a little more use of the profile of the airline and the hopes and dreams of the people."

Wilson's five-year transformed *Vihaan* (Sanskrit for "new era"), Wilson has led through the "taxi" and "climb" phases of the turnaround. By its own account it is now in the final, "climb" phase, merging its sprawling operations, driving profitability and enhancing customer value, and taking Indian aviation to the global stage.

New aircraft from 2023's huge 470-jet Boeing and Airbus order are beginning to arrive at an average rate of one every six days, allowing Air India to open more routes. The company is also overhauling tired interiors in some of its older aircraft, a process delayed by supply chain bottlenecks in the global industry.

Wilson completed two mergers in 2024 — between Air India and Vistara, its joint venture with Singapore Airlines, and between its two regional airlines, Air India Express and Air Asia India.

This is a corporate turnaround story in sync with India's triumphalist narrative under the Narendra Modi government of a rising nation proudly shedding its past of colonial oppression and economic underperformance.

For Tata, the business opportunity is clear: if Air India successfully transforms its fleet, upgrades its service and flies more new routes between India and Europe, North America and the Asia-Pacific region, it can win back customers who had sworn off it, including passengers among India's large diaspora.

The airline is still in the red: it reported a net loss of Rs44bn (\$520mn) in the financial year to the end of March 2024, narrower than the Rs114bn it had lost the previous year.

For some, the change is not fast enough. Indian media and social media have revelled in Air India's mishaps since Tata bought it, from missing luggage and damaged seats to poor food and two emergency landings in Russia for safety reasons in 2023 and 2024.

"People are getting impatient about why it is taking so long for Air India to be rejuvenated, to be made into a world-class airline, which has been the ambition of the Tatas," said Jitendra Bhargava, a former executive director of the airline and author of a book on the carrier, *The Descent of Air India*.

Wilson insisted the turnaround is on track, saying it was a feat to have man-



Jet-propelled: boss Campbell Wilson, below, says rapid progress has been made, with new aircraft such as the Airbus A350, above and bottom — Holbe Adams/Bloomberg, Lionel Ng/Bloomberg, Richard Baker/In Pictures/Getty Images



aged two mergers, an overhaul of the Air India brand — including a new logo, uniforms and livery — and to have recruited more than 9,000 employees, reducing the workforce's average age from 54 to 35.

"There's no airline that I'm aware of in history that has done all these things at the same time, and done it in two and a bit years," he said.

When Tata bought Air India, it was struggling to pay vendors and had 30 aircraft on the ground that, Wilson recalls, the airline was cannibalising for

parts to keep the rest of the fleet flying. Staff were using private Gmail accounts for company business. Air India was the last airline using its ancient, mainframe computer reservation system.

Tata committed \$200mn to revamping its IT system and consolidated 63 offices into a single campus in Gurugram.

In February 2023 it announced what was then the biggest jet order in aviation history for 470 aircraft, later to be piped by its biggest domestic rival IndiGo, which ordered 500 jets from Airbus in June.

Wilson also set about refurbishing interiors and sourcing components for Air India's existing fleet, including the 30 grounded jets that had been raided for parts. "Something like 30,000 components we had to find — and that was just one aircraft," he said.

Delivery of some of the Boeing aircraft, he added, had been delayed by the recent strike by machinists at the US group, further straining a "tight market" for delivery of aircraft and components.

"Every airline is affected," Wilson said. "It's just probably a little bit more frustrating for us, in an aircraft and product renewal process with an appetite for massive expansion."

However, Air India has managed to induct 100 aircraft in less than two years, allowing it to launch more than 100 new routes.

Outside critics of the airline say Wilson should have taken a more radical approach to overhauling its fleet, which still includes old aircraft with dowdy interiors on many domestic routes. Indian media have highlighted complaints about "unclean, worn-off seats" or a traveller on a New York-bound flight who said she was served an omelette with a cockroach in it.

"The problem with Air India was

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never about the branding," said Mark Martin, an aviation analyst and chief executive of Martin Consulting. "The problem with Air India was the quality of the product — the seats, the cabins, the heat exchanges, the in-flight entertainment — and the first priority should have been to get the 180 existing aircraft back online."

Because some of the jets were older and their parts no longer in production, Wilson has had to turn to Air India sister company Tata Technologies to help reverse-engineer plastics, trays and recliners for business and first-class seats. (A business seat in a Boeing 787, he said, had 11 different actuators to control its position.)

Air India still faces entrenched scepticism among Indians who abandoned it during its decades of decline. It also faces vigorous competition from the foreign carriers that fly to India and from its biggest domestic rival IndiGo, which introduced an "IndiGo Stretch" business class on the Delhi-Mumbai route last month, taking the flag carrier on directly for its highest-value customers.

Bhargava thinks that in a growing Indian market both Air India and IndiGo "will give any Gulf airline a run for the money" once they take delivery of all their long-haul aircraft on order.

Wilson acknowledges the competition, but points to small victories, such as Condé Nast Traveller having recently voted Air India the world's 12th-best airline.

"We do see this as a bit of a national mission, to make a new Air India," he said. "If and when we get it right — and I'm quite convinced it's when — there will be a huge level of support and engagement and customer loyalty that will come."

He added: "So I'd rather there be some interest than no interest."