

With demand rising, airlines add flights to India

BY PERRY GARFINKEL

Singapore Airlines added nine weekly flights to India last year, bringing its total to 104. Air France-KLM is increasing its seat capacity on Indian flights by 25 percent this winter. United Airlines has just begun offering nonstop seasonal daily flights from San Francisco to Delhi. And Delta Air Lines began nonstop service between Kennedy International Airport in New York and Mumbai in December.

In the past few years, more than 20 of the 80 international airlines that fly to India have added service, in some cases through arrangements with other airlines, called code sharing. Travel between the United States and India increased 10.3 percent from the first half of 2018 to the first half of 2019, American Express Global Business Travel reported.

At this pace, India is expected to become the third-largest aviation market by 2024, behind China and the United States, according to the Center for Aviation, a company that provides market intelligence to the aviation and travel industry.

The uptick in flights, experts say, is the result of a variety of economic, social, immigration and travel trends. More international social media and tech companies are setting up shop in India or increasing their staffs. A growing number of Indians are living and working in the United States, Canada, Britain and elsewhere, and that means more homeland visits for traditionally close-knit Indian families.

Tourism continues to rise. The contribution of travel and tourism to India's gross domestic product — the broadest measure of goods and services produced in India — is expected to increase to \$492.2 billion in 2028, from \$234 billion in 2017. The World Travel and Tourism Council ranked India third among 185 countries in terms of tourism's total contribution to the national economy in 2018. It was seventh in 2016.

The international airlines have also increased the flights in the wake of the

collapse of Jet Airways in April 2019, which in 2018 accounted for nearly 20 percent of passengers flown by Indian airlines, and the slow decline of the Indian government-owned carrier Air India.

While there are signs of an economic slowdown in India, business travel to India remains strong. And driving that travel is bilateral trade, said Gunjan Bagla, managing director of Amritt Ventures, a company in Malibu, Calif., that helps Western companies market their products and services to India.

"When I started my company in 2003, bilateral trade between India and the U.S. was \$16 billion," said Mr. Bagla, who is also the author of "Doing Business in 21st Century India." "Now it's \$142 billion. That means more executives are flying back and forth hashing out deals face to face."

In addition, he said, he sees indications that the Indian government "has become more business friendly."

Raymond Kollau, the founder of the aviation research agency Airline Trends, said that while studies showed that well-established aviation regions like Europe and North America would continue to grow, "the global economic center of gravity is shifting from the West to emerging Asian countries, which means more airlines are looking east before they look west."

He cited an Airbus forecast of a steeper increase in air trips per capita in India and China from 2018 to 2038 than in the United States. The forecast attributed the rise to a faster-growing middle class in emerging countries than in mature Western nations.

Stéphane Ormand, the vice president and general manager of Air France-KLM USA, said the economic growth in India, despite fluctuations, still exceeded China's. "That's triggered our focus on India now," he said.

He continued: "It was very different 15 years ago, when China was growing fast. Now, India is growing faster than China. Their improved infrastructure — roads, airports, electricity, better connectivity — all make traveling and working there easier."



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The airport in Mumbai, India is expected to become the third-largest aviation market by 2024, behind China and the United States.

Mr. Ormand singled out the Texas market, with its oil, technology and medical companies and their ties to India.

Not only are airlines adding flights to and from India, they're also bringing more Indian culture to the in-flight experience. Many are offering more films in regional dialects and menus with dishes that reflect India's diverse culinary tradition.

British Airways, which last summer increased its weekly flights between India and London to 56 from 49, offers

films in Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, Punjabi, Telugu and Bengali. Lufthansa, which already operates daily nonstop flights from Frankfurt and Munich to four Indian cities and will start five-day-a-week flights in April between Munich and Bangalore, shows films in Telugu, Tamil and Hindi, along with five television shows in Hindi.

Manny Chohan is the dream target of these airlines — business traveler, family visitor and tourist. Born in the Indian state of Punjab, Mr. Chohan, a naturalized citizen of the United States, has

lived in New York for 35 years. The executive vice president of revenue and operations for Dream Hotels, based in New York, he travels two or three times a year to India to look for property development deals. He adds quick visits to his relatives in Punjab, but also goes with his whole family on longer stays to see others throughout India and to take side trips to historic sites.

Mr. Chohan said he flew on Etihad Airways because it offered him the greatest number of options to cities in India from New York, connecting

through Abu Dhabi. Etihad, the second-largest airline in the United Arab Emirates, started service to India in 2004, with a daily flight to Mumbai. It now flies 159 times a week to 10 Indian cities.

Etihad and Emirates, the biggest airline in the United Arab Emirates, cater to the regional tastes of Indians and Indian food lovers. Emirates, for example, introduced a Gujarati dish, *turiya vatana muthia* (ridge gourd and green pea dumpling), on flights out of the Gujarat state's hub, Ahmedabad.

The growing number of Indians who have left their homeland continues to spur more travel to visit family back home. In Canada, for example, Indians are now the second-largest immigrant community (after Chinese immigrants), with about 30,000 people a year moving there.

Canada's national airline, Air Canada, now has 18 weekly flights from Toronto and Vancouver to Mumbai and Delhi; many have Hindi-speaking flight attendants.

"The Indian market is of major importance to us," said Mark Galardo, the vice president of network planning at Air Canada. The airline has hired Vikram Vij, a Canadian Indian chef, cookbook author and television personality, to develop menus for first-class travelers. Business-class travelers on Air Canada flights from Toronto to Delhi can now choose such dishes as "Maharaja-style" butter chicken and paneer or chana masala, served with roasted cumin rice and garlic cilantro naan.

Anjela Evangelista, the travel and expense manager for Twitter, said she was making trips to India more often, always flying Cathay Pacific's premium economy.

"When I started here almost five years ago, I went about once a year, mostly to our main office in Bangalore," Ms. Evangelista said. "Now, we've opened offices in Mumbai and New Delhi, so I go at least twice a year. A lot of our 300-person shared services team go over to oversee travel and entertainment audits and training at least once a year."