

# Airline industry stats by IATA confirm 2020 as worst year on record

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) released its [IATA World Air Transport Statistics \(WATS\)](#) publication with performance figures of 2020, demonstrating the devastating effects on global air transport during the first year of the COVID-19 crisis. The steady decline in air passengers transported in 2020 is the largest recorded since global revenue passenger-kilometers (RPKs) started being tracked around 1950.

- 1.8B passengers flew in 2020; a decrease of 60.2% compared to the 4.5B billion passengers who flew in 2019
- Industry-wide air travel demand (RPKs) dropped by 65.9% YOY
- International passenger demand (RPKs) decreased by 75.6% compared to 2019
- Domestic air passenger demand (RPKs) decreased by 48.8% compared to 2019
- Air connectivity declined by more than half in 2020, with the number of routes connecting airports significantly decreasing at the outset of the pandemic; this statistic was down more than 60% YOY in April 2020
- Total industry passenger revenues fell by 69% to \$189B (USD) in 2020; net losses were \$126.4B (USD) in total

“2020 is a year that we’d all like to forget. However, the performance statistics of the year reveals an amazing story of perseverance. At the peak of the pandemic in April 2020, 66% of the world’s commercial air transport fleet was grounded as governments closed borders and imposed strict lockdowns. One million jobs disappeared. Industry losses of the year totaled \$126B (USD).

“Many governments recognized aviation’s critical contributions and provided financial lifelines and other forms of support. But it was the rapid actions by airlines and the commitment of our people that saw the airline industry through the most difficult year in its history,” says Willie Walsh, Director General, IATA.

## Key 2020 airline performance figures released by WATS:

### a) Passenger

- Systemwide, airlines carried 1.8B passengers on scheduled services; a decrease of 60.2% YOY
- On average, there was a \$71.7 (USD) loss incurred per passenger in 2020, resulting in net losses of \$126.4B (USD) in total
- Measured in available seat kilometers (ASKs), global airline capacity plummeted by 56.7%, with international capacity being hit the hardest with a reduction of 68.3%
- Systemwide, passenger load factor dropped to 65.1% in 2020 compared to 82.5% YOY
- The Middle East region suffered the largest proportion of loss for passenger traffic, with a drop of 71.5% in RPKs vs. 2019, followed by Europe (-69.7%) and the Africa region (-68.5%)
- China became the largest domestic market in 2020 for the first time on record, as air travel rebounded faster among the domestic market following its efforts to control COVID-19
- Based on total passengers carried on scheduled services by airlines registered in the region, the regional rankings read as follows:

1. Asia-Pacific: 780.7M passengers, a decrease of 53.4% compared to the region's passengers in 2019

2. North America: 401.7M passengers, down 60.8% vs. 2019

3. Europe: 389M passengers, down 67.4% vs. 2019
4. Latin America: 123.6M passengers, down 60.6% vs. 2019
5. Middle East: 76.8M passengers, down 67.6% vs. 2019
6. Africa: 34.3M passengers, down 65.7% vs. 2019

The **top five airlines** ranked by total scheduled passenger kilometers flown:

- American Airlines: 124B
- China Southern Airlines: 110.7B
- Delta Air Lines: 106.5B
- United Airlines: 100.2B
- China Eastern Airlines: 88.7B

The **top five route areas** ranked by passenger demand (RPKs):

- Within Europe: 290.3M, down 70.7% vs. 2019
- Europe – North America: 122.9M, down 80.4% vs. 2019
- Within Far East: 117.3M, down 84.1% vs. 2019
- Europe – Far East: 115.3M, down 79% vs. 2019
- Middle East – Far East: 104M, down 73.6% vs. 2019

The **top five domestic passenger airport-pairs** (all in Asia & outperformed top intl. routes):

- Jeju – Seoul Gimpo: 10.2M, up 35.1% vs. 2019
- Hanoi – Ho Chi Minh City: 5.9M, up 54.3% vs. 2019
- Shanghai-Hongqiao – Shenzhen: 3.7M, up 43.4% vs. 2019
- Beijing-Capital – Shanghai-Hongqiao: 3.6M, up 11.8% vs. 2019
- Guangzhou – Shanghai-Hongqiao: 3.5M, up 41.2% vs. 2019

The **top five nationalities** (traveling internationally by air):

- United States: 45.7M or 9.7% of all passengers
- United Kingdom: 40.8M or 8.6% of all passengers
- Germany: 40.8M or 8.6% of all passengers
- France: 23.3M or 4.9% of all passengers
- India: 17.4M or 3.7% of all passengers

## b) Cargo

- Air freight was the bright spot in air transport for 2020, as the market adapted to keep goods moving including vaccines, personal protective equipment and vital medical supplies
  - Industry-wide available cargo tonne-kilometers (ACTKs) fell by 21.4% YOY, which led to a capacity crunch, with the industry-wide cargo load factor up by 7% points (to 53.5%)
  - This is the highest value in the IATA series since its conception in 1990
  - By the end of 2020, industry-wide cargo tonne-kilometers (CTKs) returned close to pre-crisis levels; however, the yearly decline in CTKs was the largest since the Global Financial Crisis in 2009, at a sizeable 9.7%

The **top five airlines** ranked by scheduled cargo tonne-kilometers flown:

- Federal Express: 19.7B
- United Parcel Service: 14.4B
- Qatar Airways: 13.7B
- Emirates: 9.6B
- Cathay Pacific Airways: 8.1B

A preview of the World Air Transport Statistics can be [downloaded here](#). Those interested can also [purchase the complete set of WATS statistics](#), which includes further figures and analysis.