REPORT: AIRLINE SAFETY

What you need to know
August 2023

With many governments lifting or easing COVID-19 travel related restrictions, airline passenger numbers surged in 2022. While the number of flights carrying them increased by 25% to just over 32 million, this was still 32% fewer than airlines operated in 2019.

Air travel remained incredibly safe in 2022. While the number of accidents might have increased by more than one-third, there were still only 39 in total.[1] Overall, an accident occurred every 826,088 flights. What this means is that a single traveler taking one flight every day would most likely need to fly for 2,263 years before experiencing an accident.[2] Better still than such a low probability, the number of fatal accidents remained incredibly low at just five, and this was lower than the seven recorded in 2021. And just two of these incidents involved fatalities among crew and/or passengers. As a result, the fatal accident rate dipped from 0.27 per million sectors in 2021 to just 0.16, which was below the five-year average of 0.20.

If simply to comply with their company's duty of care responsibilities, travel managers want to be sure their travelers are flying as safely as possible. In this respect, they may want to know how safe particular airlines are. This report explores the issue of airline safety and outlines why rating individual airlines on their safety is both difficult and inadvisable.

Regulatory oversight matters more than individual airline safety

Operating country matters

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) works on the principle that airline safety is often only as good as the regulatory body overseeing and enforcing it.[3] This is why organizations like EASA (the European Union Aviation Safety Agency) and the US FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) tend to assign safety ratings to countries (and not to individual airlines).

The FAA's International Aviation Safety Assessment Program (IASA) categorizes countries as Category One or Category Two in terms of safety. These ratings reflect the operating standards adopted by airlines based in these countries.

- Category One: A country's commercial aviation practices align with ICAO (the UN's International Civil Aviation Organization) standards. It does not reflect the safety of an individual airline; all airlines are expected to comply with their home country's standards.
- Category Two: Some safety concerns exist, which until resolved, prevent a country's airlines from adding new services to the U.S.

Mexico is a case in point. In May 2021, the U.S. downgraded the country to Category 2, after finding its airspace safety fell short of ICAO standards.[4] As a result, the FAA blocked all Mexican airlines, without exception, from adding new flights to U.S. until Category One has been restored. Expansion of marketing

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[1] IATA, March 7, 2023
[2] IATA, 2022 IATA Annual Safety Report
[3] IATA, Airline Safety Ratings, position paper
[4] Reuters, June 3, 2023

agreements with U.S. airlines has also been prevented. All Mexican airlines were impacted for the shortcoming of the national regulator.

EASA's EU Air Safety List identifies all airlines banned from operating in Europe (Annex A) and those that are restricted from operating under certain restrictions in Europe (Annex B).[5] Adhering to IATA's principle of assessing regulatory standards as a proxy for implied airline safety, it has imposed blanket bans on all airlines certified by the authorities in the following countries:

- Europe: Armenia (including Armenian Airlines and Fly Arna), Russia (all airlines)
- Asia: Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal
- Africa: Angola (excluding TAAG), Congo Brazzaville, DR Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Liberia, Libya, Sao Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone, Sudan

How airline safety varies around the world

The principle adopted by bodies like EASA and the FAA is simple: The safety of an airline reflects the safety standards of the country in which it is based, and to which it should be complying. And as the illustration below shows, safety rates can vary both geographically and over time.[6]

Figure 1: Airline accident rates in 2021 and 2022
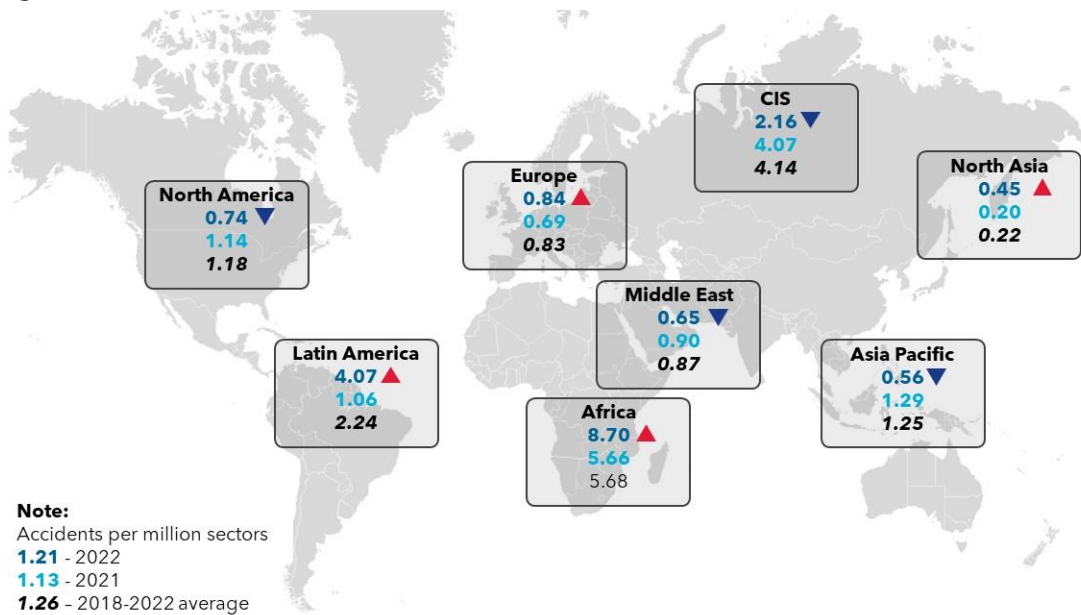
In 2022, the number of accidents per million sectors flown increased slightly from 1.13 to 1.21, but it still remained below the five year average of 1.26. Accident rates increased in four regions, including Europe and North Asia, but also decreased in four, including North America and the rest of Asia Pacific. But actual accident rates varied considerably between regions, ranging from highs of 8.70 in Africa and 4.07 in Latin America down to just 0.45 in North Asia.

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[5] EU Air Safety List, June 2023
[6] IATA, 2022 Interactive Safety Report

Individual airlines can still be targeted on safety

Aviation regulators do possess the power, however, to censure individual airlines based on specific concerns about their safety and operating procedures. One such case is Pakistan International Airlines (PIA). EASA, together with the U.K.s' Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), was among the regulators that barred PIA in June 2020. This was in response to a fake pilot license scandal, in which 262 of Pakistan's airline pilots were suspended, including 141 at PIA.[7]

At the moment, in addition to state-wide bans, EASA has also banned six airlines from operating in European airspace: Air Zimbabwe, Avior Airlines (Venezuela), Blue Wing Airlines (Suriname), Iran Aseman Airlines and Iraqi Airways.

IATA's view on airline safety

How safe are individual airlines?

This is not the question the International Air Transport Association (IATA) believes people should be asking. In fact, it does not consider safety ratings or rankings to be a valid measure of an individual airline's safety performance.[8] Specific airlines should not be highlighted either for their strong or poor safety records. Commercial air transport's extraordinary safety performance owes much to the co-operation of airlines, manufacturers, government regulators and other stakeholders. When an accident happens, it could be due to a failing at any point in this network of co-operators, but it's the airline that suffers the direct consequences.

Why airline ratings are of no value

A ranking approach implies the responsibility for accidents and incidents lies solely with the airline impacted and fails to take into account other contributing factors. Most accidents involve a chain of events that may involve multiple actors. This alone means airline safety rankings are inherently flawed. IATA believes such ratings provide no value to travelers for three reasons, outlined below.

Small data samples

Airline incidents, and fatal accidents in particular, are thankfully extremely rare. As a result, a single event can result in a big swing in an airline's safety performance.

Accountability is not clear cut

The causes of an incident or accident can be complex, with non-airline participants, including aircraft and engine manufacturers, airports, air navigation service providers, ground handling companies, etc. potentially contributing. Blame need not necessarily lie with the airline.

Rankings are too simplistic

Ranking systems must judge the severity on an accident, but this is often influenced by external conditions and events. And when creating rankings, it's very difficult to apply precise weightings to the results, as these vary on an ongoing basis.

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[7] Simpleflying.com, July 24, 2023
[8] IATA, 2018, Airline Safety Ratings, a position paper

The FAA broadly agrees with IATA, finding no evidence in accident data to support the ranking of individual airlines based on their safety records.[9] Because of the infrequent but catastrophic nature of an air accident, two airlines' safety records may appear to be starkly different at a particular point in time. But the FAA finds no evidence of such differences persisting. What's more, they have little value in predicting future safety performance.

Airline rankings based on past accident records are of little use to travelers seeking to choose the safest airline for a future trip.

What do the airline rankings say?

While being mindful of their shortcomings and advice from aviation industry experts not to rely on them, it may still be of some interest to see which airlines top the safety rankings, albeit based on questionable methodologies. After all, it's not possible to prevent travelers (or travel managers) referring to them, if they have any doubts about an airline's safety.

AirlineRatings.com

In making their determinations for each airline's safety rating, AirlineRatings.com makes a (subjective) analysis of the following: crashes over the last five years, serious incidents over two years, audits from aviation's governing bodies and leading associations, fleet age, expert analysis of pilot training and COVID-19 protocols. It's list of top 20 airlines probably contains few surprises.

Rank	Airline	Rank	Airline
1	Qantas	11	Cathay Pacific
2	Air New Zealand	12	Hawaiian Airlines
3	Etihad Airways	13	SAS
4	Qatar Airways	14	United Airlines
5	Singapore Airlines	15	Lufthansa Group
6	TAP Air Portugal	16	Finnair
7	Emirates	17	British Airways
8	Alaska Airlines	18	KLM
9	EVA Air	19	American Air Lines
10	Virgin Australia/Virgin Atlantic	20	Delta Air Lines

Source: AirlineRatings.com[10]

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[9] FAA, Safety Record of Airlines/Aircraft
[10] AirlineRatings.com

How BCD Travel can help

Travel risk management (TRM) is vital in helping companies meet their ethical and legal obligations to protect the wellbeing, safety, and health of employees, stakeholders, and customers. While airline safety and transportation security remain important components, there are many other risks and elements that are essential to building an advanced TRM program. With the *Traveler Security Program Assessment*, BCD Travel's Global Crisis Management (GCM) team helps clients evaluate their existing TRM program, clearly define ways to enhance their program, and further reduce risk through 11 key areas, all while aligned with ISO 31030:2021, Travel risk management – Guidance for organizations.

Creating an effective risk strategy involves identifying potential risks and taking steps to mitigate those risks. When it comes to optimizing your travel program for risk management, BCD Travel has even more to offer. The BCD marketplace is a one stop shop for best-in-class TRM solutions, all ready to seamlessly integrate into your business travel program. Learn more and explore your options within the *marketplace*.

If you have any questions or comments regarding this report, please email mike.eggleton@bcdtravel.co.uk to share your thoughts.