

Jeremy's World: Updates from Aviation Festival Asia



(Left to Right) Ajith Balakumar, CEO of Forthcode, and Jeremy Clark at Aviation Festival Asia

Last week saw the return of the [Aviation Festival Asia](#) to Singapore and I went along for *PAX International* to see if there's anything new and noteworthy in the onboard services world.

The dominant narrative seems to be all about what AI might be doing to change the experience and as usual, the “digitalization” of processes that has been promised for years now and in 95 percent of locations still has yet to materialize.

The keynotes were taken first by [Air India](#)'s CEO Campbell Wilson whose task to turn around this huge legacy cannot be underestimated. The merger with [Vistara](#) adds complexity as does the difficulty with fleet rationalization thwarted by the inability of the aircraft manufacturers to deliver on time.

The domestic market in India is dominated by [IndiGo](#), whose CEO Pieter Elbers spoke also—but more on that later. Air India sees its major opportunity in the medium-/long-haul expansion into overseas markets.

Air India wishes to retain its standing as a full-service carrier which makes it about the only one now in the country, with the demise of Kingfisher Airlines.



Live from the show floor at Aviation Festival Asia in Singapore 2024

Next up was the CEO of [Riyadh Air](#), Tony Douglas. Clearly, this project is going to be a game-changer for the Middle East if they do what they plan. Big emphasis on service and passenger experience, and an acknowledgement of PanAm's legacy and fame which they hope to mirror in some way will make this the airline to watch as they start operations in late 2024.

Riyadh Air, if properly managed, could take on [Qatar](#) and even [Emirates](#). A lot of emphasis on the young demographic of today's Saudi Arabia reminding us twice that "the average age in SA is 29." Advocating facial recognition and other highly personalized identification systems within the airline's product—although with the recent news of trojan software hijacking facial recognition ID in iOS and Android systems, he may want to revisit that and add in some more traditional backup. The airline has yet to take off, and the order book for approximately 80 aircraft is set.

[Thai Airways](#) CEO, Khun Chai Eamsiri, appeared representing legacy and Asian quality, one year on from his announcement last year to bring back the traditions of yore within a revitalized Thai Airways product. This is an ongoing challenge driven by an ambitious fleet renewal project involving 40 new Boeings with an option for 40 more. Again, the complaint here is the speed with which aircraft manufacturers are responding to demand. Service and Customer Experience are, however, still uppermost in Chai's priorities which is good news for our industry. Look out for my one-to-one with Chai later in the year focused on service, tech and food.



Amadeus highlights automation processes at Aviation Festival Asia

Talking of fleets, IndiGo's CEO Pieter Elbers revealed some eye-watering numbers of aircraft orders around 300, expansion to 30 more international destinations and a total fleet of more than 1,000 aircraft. IndiGo dominates the Indian domestic market with its slick low-cost product.

Steep competition comes from [AirAsia](#) which is increasing penetration into the Indian market, the potential of which we are reminded has yet to be fully realized. Estimations are that currently only three percent of the fast-growing Indian middle class have passports and there are currently 80 new airports under construction. This continent will experience possibly the largest expansion outside of Mainland China.

Looking at the exhibitors and the choices of break-away discussions, my takeaway from this event is that the competition for selling tech services is massively oversubscribed. The only company providing Catering Management systems bespoke to airlines was the Swedish/Indian company [Forthcode](#), who say all airlines who come to them face the same difficulty. That challenge is the connectivity between airlines' management of their onboard services and those who provide them. A sector I have been familiar with for the past 40 years and it seems some things are very slow to change.



Ajith Balakumar, CEO of Forthcode and Jeremy Clark at Forthcode's exhibit

What is clear is that Asian airlines have the edge when it comes to onboard hospitality—even the LCCs offer more than most U.S./European standard carriers in the short-medium haul. When it comes to long-haul, the Asian and Middle East carriers are, frankly, unbeatable.

So you'll understand why I'm in no hurry to move.