

Winds of change: Examining regional trends ahead of WTCE 2025



Keeping passengers connected in Asia

The [World Travel Catering and Onboard Services Expo](#) (WTCE) 2024 was the first post-lockdown event that displayed the true resilience of the supply sector in travel catering. The event was filled with enthusiasm and a self belief that only comes from surviving the most arduous of hazards.

Despite the immense challenges and hardships, most of us in the supply industry to the world's airlines skillfully navigated a way through and became stronger and possibly wiser as a result. One might almost suggest that the experience did us a favour by creating a resilience that can weather almost any storm.

But now the fresh wind of change is picking up pace and the content at this year's show reflects what is happening in the industry. New and innovative approaches to the provisioning of services – we are moving at speed away from the traditional models, and into new and clever ways of offering affordable passenger hospitality experiences. The new models of service and business are taking into consideration a number of new factors, some of which we ignored or were less important.

Cost is always number one, but this becomes a bigger challenge when faced with the reality of a

demand for more or better quality. Then there is the environmental awareness that plays a key role in many areas. The fine balance between appearing to offer more, but with less or more sustainably obtained resource is probably one of the biggest challenges facing the international travel provisioning market. This is especially why being here matters. You'll see it here first!

Looking more closely at Asia... Much has changed, especially in China, more about which I mention below..... but one of the biggest realizations is that the market and demand for travel is indestructible!

And, if our survey is anything to go by, the demand for a *quality level of service* is high. Asian, and particularly Middle Eastern airlines, are already ahead in terms of the quality of onboard service, and our survey suggests that SE Asia's demand for quality is undiminished – especially in the full-service carrier (FSC) markets.

Low-cost carriers should also take note because, as the gulf between what they offer and what the FSC offers widens, the ticket prices are narrowing. This extends not just to F&B but to crew service and amenities. For example, lounge facilities, pre-boarding and post-disembarkation processes, ground handling – these are all under scrutiny so buyers looking for innovation in these areas need to be at WTCE as well.

At the show, you will see that the world's large and multi-national catering service providers are still very much present. However, we also see a huge increase and variety of small and niche suppliers of independent products, consolidated suppliers plus a combination of services and products on offer.

This is a big change from the past. It is exciting not least because of the innovation that this delivers. As the old models are re-invented, the replacement of long-established systems opens the way for airlines to re-imagine their brand and service concepts.

For the large all-in-one operations, most of whom are here in Asia, this is an opportunity to understand how to benefit and remain contemporary. It really is only by walking among your competitors and colleagues, and having that hands-on opportunity to see new product and service concepts, that you can truly avail yourself of what is happening in our industry. All under one roof. Geographical distances do not discriminate!

The evolution of new business models affects us all and suppliers and buyers can see, discuss and network this at WTCE where there is a unique opportunity to not only learn, but to win in this market.

So, what about China? We find ourselves with two separately evolving markets, seemingly independently of each other.

China is re-inventing itself. New airports and infrastructure are light years ahead of everywhere else it seems. Although international travel into Asia is still below the 2019 figures – by December 2024, CAAC data reported 700m passenger trips since January. This is up 80m from 2023.

Recovery in 2024 has been largely driven by domestic routes, which logged about 640m trips, or 14 percent up compared to 2019. It is also notable that the domestic demands of service are vastly different from the Asian regional counterpart. Less is definitely more and that is more akin to U.S. domestic travel than anything else. As affluence increases, so might the demand for improvements here.

China's aviation data shows strong international growth, with a year-on-year surge of 130+ percent. They are coming back!

So, to summarise, we can say that the differences in the industry, since the last WTCE, are varied, significant and complex. They are also unstoppable, with an increasing inertia of volume so please take note colleagues..... "The Wind is blowin' and change, she is a-comin'."

Are you ready?