

Exclusive: Fireside chat with Thai Airways CEO Chai Eamsiri



Jeremy Clark, *PAX International* Asia Correspondent (left) with Khun Chai Eamsiri, CEO of Thai Airways

Within a couple of minutes of sitting with Khun Chai Eamsiri, CEO of [Thai Airways](#), and revealing the fact that he and I have something in common—namely a long history with airlines going back to the halcyon days of PanAm—a sparkle in his eye told me here is a gentleman who really understands the value of heritage.

I went to see Eamsiri just prior to the WTCE 2024 event primarily to pass on the happy news that Thai Airways has been nominated by *PAX International* readers as the Most Improved Airline in Asia for 2024.

In the opening minutes of chatting with this affable and friendly person, we pondered briefly on the good ole days. He was extremely quick to point out that as good as they were, the economics of modern airline operations does not lend itself to sustaining that model; moreover, Thai Airways is finding ways to regain that valuable heritage and reputation for excellence, but with a focus on economic stability.

It would seem the airline is succeeding because another accolade Thai can claim is ranking top of the airlines operating profit list for 2023.

So obviously, my first question to him was how much of this success will continue to be reinvested into the passenger experience side of the business.

Eamsiri's response referred back to a statement made when he was newly appointed as CEO and the four key points of focus that were set out for recovery.

"Our priorities are in no specific order but the first of these is a focus on being totally customer-centric. Our second focus is commercial excellence, and thirdly is achieving and maintaining cost competitiveness. Fourthly is our commitment to retaining a culture of continuous improvement."

As the conversation broadened, it became clear that priorities one, two and four are steered very much toward passenger experience.

"During the past year we have put a lot more effort into the cost competitiveness with a series of cost-cutting exercises across the business," Eamsiri says.

The focus has clearly delivered. Efforts include clearer understanding of the core markets, fleet rationalization and leaner and more efficient processes within the operation.



Jeremy Clark, *PAX International* Asia Correspondent (left) at the Thai Airways Royal Orchid Lounge entrance

Eamsiri reminds us that a year ago, a tough survival instinct that prevailed in the industry and thus, difficult decisions had to be made.

Not least the decision to take Thai's A380s out of service and build up procurement and retrofits of existing 777-9s, 10s and A350s. These are expensive but necessary building blocks for the brand image Thai Airways wants to re-establish.

"Cost cutting has been necessary," he goes on to say. "But cost cutting only that which is absolutely 2

necessary and not affecting the other three of our priorities.”

Eamsiri continues, “Although we are focusing very much on this, it doesn’t mean that we are ignoring the other key priorities and especially the first one I mentioned.”

This is manifestly true as significant improvements have been made across the service, which have been recognized by the PAX International Readership Awards nomination.

With interiors and cabin configurations in mind, I asked about Thai Airways’ approach to the class distribution and if Thai intends to retain its First Class or aim to follow other airline concepts with no First but larger Business Class cabins.

About this, Eamsiri was a little more circumspect.

“Currently we have only three aircraft with the three-class configuration and offer this to very selected few destinations, such as London. The decision-making is still a work in progress but be assured we will not compromise the Thai Royal Silk experience.”

So, watch this space. We will report as soon as we know.

Regarding destinations, further expansion to the network is underway. Oslo will soon be added to the European destinations cementing Thai’s presence in the Scandinavian market.

Looking beyond the immediate touchpoints that influence the passenger experience, Thai’s CEO reveals a policy of a much closer working relationship with airport authorities. He points out that Bangkok, especially Suvarnabhumi, is one of the world’s busiest and most congested arrival and departure points. It stands apart from its immediate neighbours of Changi and Hong Kong whose passenger mix reflects fewer arrivals compared to transit.

Thailand is Asia’s most popular tourist arrival port by a wide margin. Processing arriving and departing travellers into Thailand is a challenge.

In fact, Eamsiri remarks that, “In the past, there have been many issues to deal with between Thai Airways and the airports. As the home base airline and the airport’s largest customer, we have been working hard to establish a closer working relationship with Airports of Thailand ([AOT](#)) on all areas of development and improvement. This is extremely important to us.”

In February, Thai Airways organized a workshop for itself with AOT.

“We found the outcome of this workshop very positive. We all recognize the importance of Bangkok’s airports and particularly Suvarnabhumi as a hub and arrival point. It is the first impression visitors have of our country so we must work in harmony to make this a positive experience. This coincides with the Thai Government’s initiative to establish Bangkok as the prime connecting point for Southeast Asia,” Eamsiri explains.

Referring to service once more, I asked specifically about the project to “regain the heritage” and how much more still needs to be done.

“I think we are on track to regain up to 80 percent of what we used to be, in terms of the branding and service,” he says. “This time, we are achieving this affordably and with economic sustainability.”

Eamsiri was keen to point out the improvements to all aspects of the experience.

“Last year we improved a lot in product and service. This year we continue to put a lot of resources into every customer touchpoint with more trained people, better systems and our Thai Service with better food and drinks offerings, amenity kits, and the pre-boarding airport handling and airport facilities.”



Thai Airways lounge interior

This has been noticeably reinforced with big investments in the lounges at Suvarnabhumi.

He adds, “We still need to improve further with hardware, this means investment in seating, equipment and refitting and upgrading of aircraft plus new aircraft, and there are various projects in hand. We need to take ourselves to the level we used to be. We also realize that if we stay where we are, our competitors will take the lead. We need to ensure we stay in this peer group where we belong.”

In the Economy cabin, Eamsiri is acutely aware of something I often make a point of saying: “Today’s Economy passenger is—if you treat them well—tomorrow’s Business Class passenger.”

This has been reflected in a continuous streak of highly placed rankings for the Economy service for a number of years across several agencies. Thai Airways will not be neglecting Economy, with improved menus and IFE going forward.

When it comes to competing with the LCCs, Eamsiri has a very straightforward response. He is quick to declare that there is little to gain in attempting to compete.

“We are not the same,” he says. “We are a network airline. They are almost all regional and point-to-point and cannot offer the same level of seamless connectivity and convenience that Thai Airways can.”

This is often the problem with how passengers initially make comparisons with large heritage legacy carriers and the new breed of LCCs.

Simply comparing a fare is not an accurate comparison. Once travel needs become more complex, and the desire for convenience and comfort increases, then the role of the full-service network airlines is assured.

All told I spent an extremely pleasant hour or so with this very knowledgeable and highly experienced leader in the airline industry. We talked a little about some of the issues that challenge the industry, our experiences of the past and the hopes for the future.



Jeremy Clark, *PAX International* Asia Correspondent (left) with Khun Chai Eamsiri, CEO of Thai Airways

I can report that Thai Airways' heritage and its future as one of Asia's most revered brands is safe in Eamsiri's hands.

We rounded off by reflecting again on the changes since those PanAm days. I asked him how he sees things evolving in the same time period ahead, 30 to 40 years.

"What has been most striking is the human instinct to need to travel," he reflected. "We were told that new technology would replace the need for people to meet. Skype and internet chatrooms would replace business meetings or family and friends together."

I agreed and he continued, "In fact, the opposite has happened. And that's how I see it going far into the future. We are human beings. We like to travel and meet other people and I think this is what is going to happen. The demands will increase and who knows what technology may come along to support it."

One thing is for sure, Thai Airways was there at the beginning and, under current stewardship, is set

to be around for the challenges and changes ahead.

As we stood up for the photos, he said, "You didn't ask me about China."

Thinking about how current numbers are already close to the 2019 highs which included open Chinese markets I said, "I know. I don't think anyone's ready."

Eamsiri smiled and responded, "That's partly why we're upgrading our fleet. Thai Airways will always be ready," he said with a chuckle.