THE FRENCH CONNECTIONS

News / Airlines

Air France's strong presence in Africa is an uncomfortable relic of history but the flag-carrier is working hard to give something back to the continent. Martin Rivers reports.

As one of the largest and best-known airlines in the world, it was no surprise that Air France pulled out all the stops when unveiling its cabin upgrades last year. The French flag-carrier introduced its new first, business and economy class products at four stations across the global network: Paris, of course, was a no-brainer; so too was America's financial hub, New York; likewise, perhaps, for the Chinese metropolis of Shanghai – but the fourth destination left many observers scratching their heads.

Libreville, the capital of the West African nation of Gabon, rarely finds itself bunched together with the New Yorks and Parises of the world. Yet it was this city of less than 800,000 people that rounded off the quartet.

According to Frank Legre, senior vice-president of Africa for Air France-KLM, Libreville's inclusion in the global launch "says a lot" about the importance of Africa to the group. "I often say that we were born in Africa. Our first long-haul routes went through Africa's coast and on to South America," he explained. "So we have always been flying to Africa. It's a continent that we love and that we know very well."

Like many European flag-carriers, Air France traces its roots on the continent to the colonial

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exploits of its home nation.
Most of the group's 54 African routes were launched during the 1930s, when West Africa was largely under the control of the French Empire.
The decolonisation of the sub-region in 1960 prompted the establishment of Air Afrique – a transnational carrier jointly owned by Air France, UnionAeromaritime de Transport (UAT), and a grouping of West African states. But while Air Afrique closed its doors in 2002, Air France has continued flying to the continent through thick and thin – preserving air bridges at a time when other carriers are either incapable or unwilling to keep flying.
"We have always said we want to be the last to stop and the first to resume [African services]," Legre insisted. "It's important for us to show that, ok, you have these glittering Gulf carriers [now adding routes], but we know Africa well, we are more accustomed to Africa, and we are not afraid of what happens in Africa."

He cited Air France's handling of the Ebola crisis as proof of its commitment. The flag-carrier continued serving Conakry, Guinea throughout the epidemic, rejecting calls from cabin-crew unions to ground the route.
Although flights to Freetown, Sierra Leone were suspended in August 2014, they resumed again this summer after concerns about medical screening were addressed. "For us the issue is about tight controls at those airports for temperature checks," Legre explained. "As long as those controls are absolutely robust, as long as no exception is made, then we are confident in serving those destinations."
Flights to Monrovia in Liberia – the third main Ebola-hit country – had, meanwhile, been suspended for commercial reasons shortly before the scale of the epidemic became apparent.
Another test for Air France came during the 2010/11 political crisis in Ivory Coast, when incumbent president Laurent Gbagbo violently clung to power after losing a national election.
"We had to briefly stop our operation for a few weeks," Legre said of the crisis, which claimed more than 1,000 civilian lives. "But then who could have imagined that, five years later, we would be operating to Abidjan with an A380? We know there are downturns and upturns in Africa. But we are there to accompany and help the development of the continent."
The daily Paris-Abidjan route is now Air France's third largest African market by available seat kilometres, trailing behind only Reunion Island and Johannesburg. It was up-gauged again this year, with the A380 being deployed four times weekly during the peak season.
As well as growing intercontinental traffic to Abidjan, Air France assisted Ivory Coast's new government in setting up flag-carrier Air Cote d'Ivoire in 2012. The venture has quickly matured to become one of the two dominant airlines in West Africa, aided by extensive operational, technical and managerial support from Paris. France's flag- carrier also owns a 20% stake in the company.
Despite resurrecting some of Air Afrique's point-to-point services, Legre stressed that Air Cote d'Ivoire's primary focus is building up Abidjan as a regional hub.
"You can see there is a lot of development in Ivory Coast. Abidjan is again becoming the financial centre of western Africa, or even Africa," he said, pointing to the decision by the African Development Bank (AfDB) to re-establish its headquarters in Abidjan after an 11-year absence.
Success with the hub model in turn allows Air France to plug gaps in its own network, leaning on Air Cote d'Ivoire for connections such as Monrovia.
Elsewhere on the continent, the group offers up to 20 code-shared points through "pragmatic partnerships" with the likes of TAAG Angola Airlines and South Africa's Comair.
Its strongest ally on the eastern seaboard is Kenya Airways, which has a 20-year-old joint venture with KLM that entails revenue sharing on 44 intercontinental flights per week. KLM also has a 26.7% stake in its Kenyan affiliate. But that equity could soon be diluted, with some officials in Nairobi blaming the joint venture for their flag-carrier's weak financial performance and vowing to reduce KLM's stake during an upcoming $600 million bailout.

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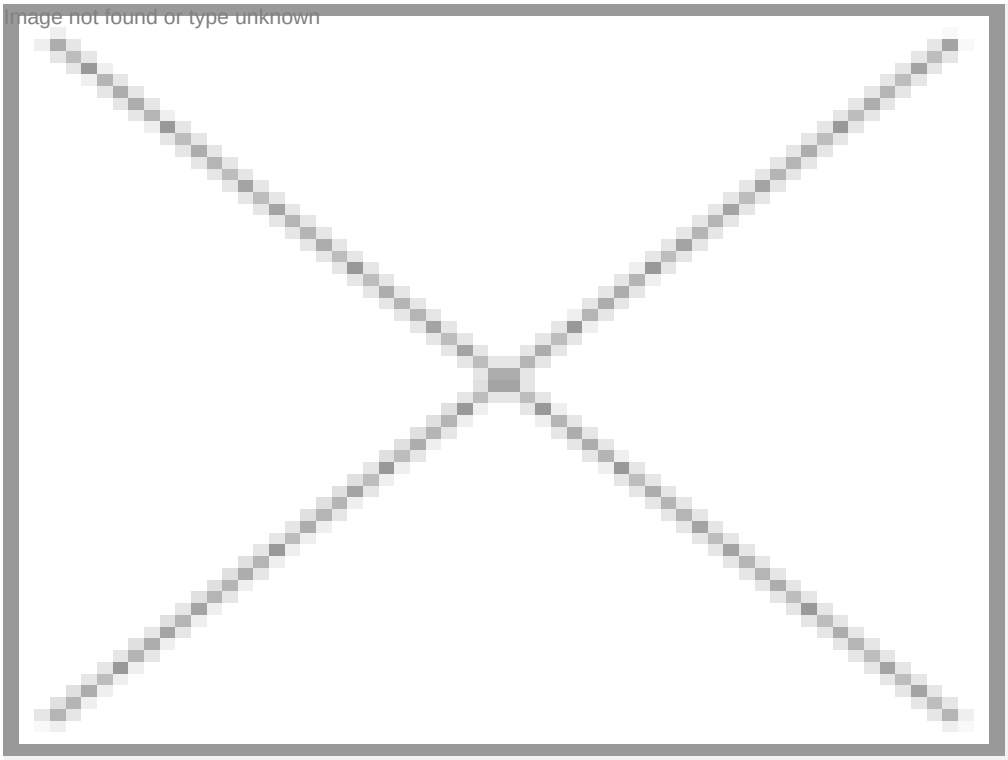

Legre did not comment on the situation at Kenya Airways beyond acknowledging that security threats have affected tourism demand. “I can’t say we see a recovery on that front yet,” he admitted. “It’s still fragile.”

More generally, however, he made clear that equity investments are falling out of vogue for Air France-KLM. The group is diluting its Air Cote d’Ivoire stake to 8% later this year, and has ruled out investing in struggling local carriers such as Senegal Airlines. Its 2.7% stake in Royal Air Maroc is, meanwhile, described as a “small legacy of the past”. Rather than buying equity, consultancy work and commercial cooperation remain the preferred approaches for Air France – as evidenced by its role in launching Congo Airways, the new flag-carrier of Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

“We were approached by the Congolese Government, which asked Air France for support in setting up a new national carrier,” Legre recalled. “Unfortunately DRC does not have a very good track record in terms of flight safety, so we were very much willing to help.”

The French flag-carrier assisted Kinshasa with everything from drawing up the business plan to sourcing aircraft to obtaining flight certificates. Its consultancy unit subsequently appointed Jerome Maillet as deputy chief executive of the Congolese airline, and at the time of writing flights were due to start.

Air France had previously been a strategic backer of Air CEMAC, the proposed transnational carrier spearheaded by the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC).

But, after years of on-again-off-again negotiations, the start-up was abandoned this summer. With his central African gaze now firmly set on DRC, Legre is considering his options for wider engagement in the country.

“Setting up the new airline is one thing,” he said. “Another thing is [considering] how can we help the Civil Aviation Authority to abide by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) rules, and make sure that it is slowly but surely moving off the [EU’s] security list.”

Though Air France has little to gain from such a project, it fits the mould of the new dynamic between France’s flag-carrier and the African continent – a relationship that has, over the decades, evolved from colonial enabler to philanthropic big brother.

One quarter of the budget of the Air France Foundation is now spent on Africa, while the Bamako-based African Institute for Careers in Aviation (IAMA) is helping to train the next generation of

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African aviators. With 4,000 Africans already on the group’s payroll, Air France-KLM wants its positive contribution to the continent to outshine the mistakes of Europe’s historic meddling.

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