BUSINESS

Ethiopian Airlines flies high on China demand

By **ZHU WENQIAN**

Ethiopian Airlines, the largest carrier in Africa, said it has seen rapid growth in demand from Chinese travelers to key African cities, and the airline is confident of its growth potential in China.

The Ethiopian national flag carrier said that flights from major Chinese cities to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, have been nearly fully booked this summer, fueled by growing demand of Chinese families taking safari vacations in Africa.

Currently, Ethiopian Airlines operates direct flights connecting Addis Ababa with Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu, Sichuan province, as well as twice-daily flights connecting Addis Ababa with Guangzhou, Guangdong province, as China-African trade has been booming between the two cities. It plans to put into use the latest Airbus A350 widebody aircraft in operating those intercontinental routes.



Aman Wole Gurmu

"Ethiopian Airlines has been continuously evaluating our route network, including connections between Chinese cities and Addis Ababa. The decision to launch new flights or increase frequencies is typically based on market demand and operational considerations," said Aman Wole Gurmu, country director of China for Ethiopian Airlines.

"Ethiopian Airlines has shown confidence in its growth potential in China, and the growth is expected to mainly come from increasing passenger traffic between China and Africa, as well as strategic partnerships and collaborations," Gurmu said.

He added that the relationship between the Chinese and Ethiopian governments is stable, and demand for business and diplomatic travel has been constantly increasing. The airline has seen a growing number of passengers, including corporate customers, diplomats and tourists.

In the first half, more than 330,000 passengers have traveled on flights of Ethiopian Airlines between the Chinese mainland and other international cities.

Besides Ethiopia, Chinese travelers have shown robust travel demand to African countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Namibia and Zimbabwe, boosting demand for the carrier's services, which operates flights to more than 60 destinations in Africa. With simplified entry procedures such as visa-on-arrival policies for multiple African countries, higher travel demand is expected from Chinese consumers.

So far, the number of international tourists traveling to Africa has recovered to 96 percent of pre-pandemic levels, and the number of passengers it transported is approaching the number seen before COVID-19.

For the passenger transportation market, in addition to its strongest African routes, the airline said its South American routes are also attracting attention.

"More guests traveling to South America take our flights to Brazil and Argentina, as transferring in Addis Ababa has advantages in transfer time and flight distances. The number of passengers who flew from Shanghai to South America and transferred in Addis Ababa accounted for more than 20 percent of Shanghai passengers flying to South America," Gurmu said.

"There is no doubt that every year we will invest more in digital marketing programs in China such as daily promotions through social media, and more strategic plans are expected to better promote our brand awareness in the Chinese market," he added.

Meanwhile, Ethiopian Airlines has accelerated the layout of its cargo network in China since the beginning of this year. It newly launched cargo routes from Ezhou, Hubei province, to Addis Ababa, and from Addis Ababa to Liege, Belgium and then to Changsha, Hunan province.

From January to June, the amount of cargo transported by Ethiopian Airlines has exceeded 60,000 metric tons, while the total cargo volume transported in the whole year of 2019 was 70,000 tons. The rapidly growing volume has been supported by strong demand for e-commerce products from China, the carrier said.

In addition, the International Air Transport Association recently released data for global passenger demand in May. Total demand, measured in revenue passenger kilometers, grew by 10.7 percent year-on-year.

"Airlines are doing everything they can to ensure smooth journeys for all travelers over the peak northern summer period," said Willie Walsh, IATA's director general.



The 700th A320 aircraft is delivered at the Airbus final assembly line in Tianjin on Monday.
LI RAN / XINHUA

Airbus bullish on biz environment in nation

European aircraft maker delivers its 700th A320 jet assembled in Tianjin

By **ZHU WENQIAN**
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European aircraft manufacturer Airbus has delivered its 700th A320 family aircraft assembled at its final assembly line in Tianjin, indicating the plane maker's long-term commitment to China, its largest single-country market.

The aircraft, an A320neo with 180 economy class seats, was handed over to Chengdu Airlines on Monday. By the end of June, Chengdu Airlines operated a fleet of 52 aircraft from the A320 family.

"The delivery of the 700th A320 family aircraft assembled in Tianjin underscores the unwavering commitment of our China teams to support Airbus' global A320 family ramp-up plan," said George Xu, Airbus executive vice-president and Airbus China CEO.

"Airbus remains dedicated to strengthening our strategic collaboration with China, reinforcing our long-term commitment to this thriving market," Xu said.

Opened in 2008, the Airbus facility in Tianjin serves as the plane maker's first commercial aircraft assembly line outside of Europe, and the Tianjin center delivered its first A320 in 2009.

Airbus started to expand its A320 fleet's final assembly capacity in Tianjin last year with a second line, and it will contribute to the company's global A320 family ramp-up plan. The new facility is expected to be put into operation and begin delivery in early 2026.

In addition, the entire A320 family aircraft has been able to operate with up to 50 percent sustainable aviation fuel. By 2030, Airbus aims for all its aircraft to be capable of operating with up to 100 percent SAF.

"China's huge civil aviation market has been attractive. In the next 20 years, the demand for single-aisle aircraft in the country is expected to double from the current level," said Zou Jianjun, a professor at the Civil Aviation Management Institute of China.

"Airbus' investment in China showcases its recognition of the final assembly capacities and the development of the aviation supply chain in China. It also indicates the company's confidence in the investment environment of the country," Zou said.

Through 2042, China will need 8,560 new commercial airplanes, including 6,470 single-aisle ones, fueled by its economic growth well above the global average and an increasing demand for domestic air travel, according to a forecast by US aircraft manufacturer Boeing Co.

Airbus' Tianjin facility has been successfully operating for over 15 years, and has become a role model of successful Sino-European cooperation. It has helped Airbus increase its market share in China.

Globally, Airbus operates four A320 final assembly sites, located in Hamburg, Germany; Toulouse, France; Mobile, Alabama, the United States; and Tianjin, China.

China's air travel market is steadily picking up after the COVID-19 pandemic. In May, the number of passengers who took domestic and international flights reached 58.87 million person-times, up 13.9 percent year-on-year, according to the Civil Aviation Administration of China.

Meanwhile, the sixth C919, China's first domestically developed narrow-body aircraft, has been put into commercial operation by Shanghai-based China Eastern Airlines. The six C919 planes are operating on four domestic commercial routes, and the daily utilization rate of the planes has continued to increase.

Since the first C919 was put into commercial operation in May 2023, the aircraft model has transported more than 300,000 person-times of passengers, China Eastern said.

Pop Mart expands Thailand footprint with new store in Bangkok

BANGKOK — Chinese toy company Pop Mart opened its sixth offline store in Bangkok and achieved sales exceeding 10 million yuan ($1.37 million) on its opening day recently.

Setting a new single-day sales record for overseas stores, the art toy company, renowned for its blind box collectibles, is taking Thailand by storm.

Having lined up at the newly opened Labubu-themed offline store overnight, Nok, a big fan of Pop Mart's popular furry doll, told Xinhua that products in Thailand are often sold out within seconds upon being stocked, with many fans even traveling to China to buy them.

"It's adorable. They have various series that are diverse and creatively designed. Their rotating selections of designer toys offer a constant supply of newness, which is a strong appeal to me," said the 33-year-old office worker.

Apart from the colorful, cute and quirky characters, the "crybaby" series created by a Thai designer is also Nok's favorite. The figures are characterized by large, teary eyes and imaginative costumes.

"Its melancholic yet cute appearance resonates with my emotions. It's comforting and relatable," she said.

Pop Mart's collaboration with local artists has sparked promising reactions in the market. For instance, the crybaby series not only made waves in the Thai market, but is also popular in China, the United States and Europe.

> "Our core business is to discover outstanding artists worldwide. We seek out potential artists, help them transform their artwork into intellectual property and bring more joy and warmth to customers."
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> **Wang Ning,** founder of Pop Mart

"Our core business is to discover outstanding artists worldwide. We seek out potential artists, help them transform their artwork into intellectual property and bring more joy and warmth to customers," said Wang Ning, founder of Pop Mart in a recent interview in Bangkok.

The character-based entertainment company serves as an incubator of artists. It handles artwork production, marketing and distribution for selected artists. It also commercializes and promotes artists' creations through branding, social media campaigns, pop-up events and exhibitions.

Merging art with playful, engaging characters has made the company a key player in the toy industry. By the end of 2023, Pop Mart had opened over 450 offline stores and more than 2,300 Robo Shops in over 30 countries and regions.

The company entered Thailand last September. The unique blind box marketing, as its secret sauce, has been sweeping the Southeast Asian economy.

It features the sale of products in opaque packaging, hiding the items' appearance of special design. What lies within remains a mystery until the seal is broken. Rare or limited editions are mixed in these boxes, adding to the excitement of the unboxing process.

The frequent release of limited edition figures and special series creates a sense of exclusivity and urgency among collectors. Consumers strike to complete their sets, driving repeat purchasing.

"The anticipation of the unknown is addictive. I enjoy the thrill of surprise from unboxing. When you get your desired one, you feel like you have hit the jackpot. If not, we can exchange it with friends from the fan pages," Mint, a 44-year-old Labubu fan who visits the shops every week, told Xinhua.

"When I feel happy, I want a new toy. When I'm upset, the joy of surprise from unboxing heals me. After all, it's affordable," she said.

Beyond purchasing, Mint enjoys a sense of community. She said Pop Mart provides a space online and offline for enthusiasts to come together, and share their passion for discovering new pieces.



A consumer takes selfies with a doll at a Pop Mart outlet in Bangkok on Friday. SUN WEITONG / XINHUA

The engagement of the fan community mirrors the rich collector culture of Thailand. As a host of 12 international toy fairs, the Southeast Asian country has fostered a vibrant collector market. Thailand boasts a tradition of appreciating art and miniatures, from intricately designed temple models to vibrant street art.

Thai consumers, particularly the younger generation, are drawn to trends and aesthetics. Pop Mart's art toy collectibles, featuring adorable and detailed characters, resonated deeply with this cultural affinity, Justin Moon, president of Pop Mart International, told Xinhua.

He said travel retailing is Pop Mart's next priority in Thailand, as the country is a renowned tourism destination. Besides the capital Bangkok, the company plans to open more stores in popular destinations like Chiang Mai and Phuket.

"In the future, Pop Mart can become more than art toys. We plan to leverage the wave that started with fun, excitement, and surprises as a bridge to new businesses that focus on entertaining consumers, such as theme parks, games, or even animation," Moon said.

XINHUA

Hilly city in Henan gets expert grid protection

By **ZHUANG QIANGE**
and **PANG BO**

In the mountainous Linzhou under the prefecture-level city of Anyang in Henan province, unlike in recent years, this year's rains have seemed to fall more fiercely.

On July 1, shortly after the wet season began, rainwater on Hongqi Canal Ave had already reached ankle-depth, leaving the elderly gathered at a senior activity center — No 7 Courtyard among China State Construction employee buildings — increasingly concerned.

If a potential power outage resulted due to the downpours, their journey home without the benefit of operating elevators would be as challenging as a mountain ascent.

Amid the torrential rains, staffers of State Grid Linzhou Power Supply Co were working to prevent potential power outages in their various areas and jurisdictions of responsibility.

As most streets in Linzhou were rapidly becoming submarine thoroughfares, Hu Zhifang and one of his colleagues began to wade slowly along a 10-kilovolt power distribution line, as he considers that these lines are like veins of a city and need special care to maintain.

Hu, 42, inspected distribution boxes and pole foundations amid the rains, checking the waterproofing facilities at each stop, and looking for potential hazards in pole foundations.

"Rainy day inspections might reveal some safety hazards we usually overlook," he said.

At the entrance to the underground power distribution room at No 7 Courtyard, Hu and his colleague stood for a long time, leaving only after confirming that waterproofing measures were adequate.

Meanwhile, on a winding mountain road, transmission line team leader Cui Bingbin and his members were trudging through thick mud, binoculars at hand, inspecting transmission lines in the rugged hills.

After ascending steep slopes and fording streams, they cleared fallen branches obstructing the lines and checked for foundational and other structural flaws amid the downpour.

"Usually, this line is patrolled in its entirety once a month, but it needs special protection during wind and rain," Cui said.

At the same time, Caojia Village Substation, which is located at the northeast corner of the intersection of Taixing Rd and Luban Ave, was facing particularly tough flood prevention efforts due to its low-lying location.

"Earlier, we had prepared flood prevention sandbags here in May, putting drainage pumps in place, and now we are inspecting the drainage ditches daily to prevent blockages," said Li Guanqi, station master.

As the rains poured down incessantly, Li led his team to recheck the substation's drainage and cable ditches, avoiding any blockage or water accumulation.

"As safety is paramount, we cannot overlook any detail," he added.

Prior to the large-scale rural grid transformation in the city, Linzhou's power grid had poor resistance to natural elements, and the power workers' only weapon was vigilance and diligence, which has become their tradition in maintaining power safety for the city's residents.

"We feel uneasy if we don't recheck and ensure the equipment is fine during windy or rainy weather. Although the grid's ability to withstand natural disasters is improving, we still retain our tradition here," Li said.

The power lines and substations in Linzhou continue to withstand heavy rains, without any power outages.

Wang Kefeng and Jia Xiaopeng contributed to this story.

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