

Hospitality

Touching Hearts

An Interview with M. Ilker Ayci,
Chairman of the Board and the Executive Committee, Turkish Airlines



M. Ilker Ayci

EDITORS' NOTE Born in Istanbul in 1971, M. Ilker Ayci graduated from Bilkent University's Department of Political Science and Public Administration in 1994 and went to the U.K. to work as a researcher at Leeds University's Department of Political Science. In 1997, he graduated from the International Relations Masters program (English) in Marmara University. Early in his career, Ayci held a variety of roles at Kurtsan laçları A.S., Istanbul Municipal Authority and Universal Dış Ticaret A.S. He was also assigned as General Manager of Basak Sigorta A.S. between 2005 and 2006, General Manager of Günes Sigorta A.S. between 2006 and 2011, the President of The Investment, Support and Promotion Agency of Turkey between 2011 and 2015 and Vice President and President of the World Association of Investment Agencies between 2013 and 2015. He has been Turkish Airlines' Chairman of the Board and the Executive Committee since April 2015.

COMPANY BRIEF Turkish Airlines (turkishairlines.com) began operations in 1933 with just five aircraft. Today, the Star Alliance member has a passenger and cargo fleet of 329 aircraft and flies to 49 domestic and 300 destinations around the world. Having been announced as "Europe's Best Airline" six years running, Turkish Airlines was given the "Southern Europe's Best Airline" award for the ninth time at the 2017 Skytrax Awards. In 2010, the economy class food served by Turkish Airlines received the "Best Economy Class Food Service" award. In 2013, 2014 and 2016, it received the "Best Business Class Food Service" award. After winning the "Best Business Class Passenger Lounge" and "Best Business Class Passenger Lounge Food Service" awards in 2015 and 2016, this year's Skytrax Awards presented Turkish Airlines with these honors for the third year in a row.

Turkish Airlines has a clearly defined set of values. Would you highlight these core values and how deeply engrained they are in the airline's culture?

As an airline that excels in service quality, we hold ourselves and our teams to the very highest standards to continue providing world-class service and inimitable experiences for our guests. To deliver this type of service, we have a distinct set of strong and clear values we adhere to. They include honesty and fair dealing, customer satisfaction, demonstrating respect to individuals, innovation, teamwork, leadership, productivity, confidentiality and an "open door" policy. Moreover, we brandish a core attribute that is deeply rooted in our culture – hospitality – at every possible opportunity; "touching hearts" as we call it. This approach is based on winning our guests' (we call our passengers our guests) hearts at all contact points and we only feel our mission has been accomplished when our passengers disembark our aircraft with smiles on their faces.

Flying to more countries than any other airline in the world, Turkish Airlines caters to a very wide range of passenger expectations, tastes and demands. Our employees from all across the world know for a fact that the quality image and prestige we enjoy in the eyes of our guests depends on the brand experience they have during their time with us, both on the ground and in the air. This brand experience is our most treasured asset and all of our employees undergo regular training as to how best present our products and services to our guests from all over the globe.

These values are deeply engrained in our brand's culture and we make sure that our teams know them by heart.

How do you see the state of the airline sector today and where are the greatest opportunities for growth for Turkish Airlines?

The state of the airline sector today is extremely competitive, which constantly fuels our drive to not only meet but exceed travelers' expectations. In our industry, following the trends can keep one in the race but, in intense competition, going one step further makes all the difference. Turkish Airlines has made innovation a part of the company culture and is constantly striving to improve our brand experience. We design, and put into use, new products and services that reflect the next phase of

air travel along with the award-winning Turkish Airlines quality. Already connecting continents, countries and cultures via our Istanbul hub, Turkish Airlines is in a position to further cement its leadership status in the number of international routes with Istanbul New Airport, which is due to become operational by October 2018.

We see Istanbul New Airport as a great opportunity for further expanding our flight network for discerning travelers and connecting more communities around the world. We currently fly to 300 destinations in 120 countries on five continents, more than any other airline in the world. From the Americas, we fly nonstop to Istanbul and beyond from 17 gateway cities including Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Atlanta, Miami, Houston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Montreal, Toronto, Havana, Panama, Caracas, Bogota, Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires. Istanbul continues to be a major international hub centrally located between Europe, Asia and Africa and provides excellent connectivity. As a result, we have extensive coverage in these regions, serving 113 destinations in Europe and 70 in Asia including the Middle East and the Far East. Africa is especially important for Turkish Airlines as we consider it a key growth market where we are continuously strengthening our presence across the continent. Currently, we are the continent's top international carrier with 51 destinations served.

Scheduled to be the world's largest international hub (by passenger capacity) once fully complete, Istanbul New Airport will be a major boost for Turkish Airlines, as it will greatly help us to expand our flight network. In addition to our traditional markets, we will reach further in Asia and the Far East, one of the fastest growing regions in aviation, as we will gain more capacity. Regarding these regions, partnerships may also come into play as part of our growth strategy.

As a side note, cargo transportation is another field in which we have strong performance. One of our subsidiaries, Turkish Cargo, is growing rapidly and achieved a growth rate of 29 percent in the first nine months of last year compared to the previous. Already in the global top 10, Turkish Cargo aims to enter the top five in air-freight business in the coming years.

Turkish Airlines has placed a major emphasis on service. Would you discuss the airline's service standards and the investment that you have made in training your employees in regard to service quality?

The quality we attach to our entire range of services carries the core values found in Turkish culture and hospitality. Through this, we have won a multitude of awards through the years, excelling especially in business class.

Turkish Airlines was selected for six consecutive years as the "Best Airline in Europe" by Skytrax, the world's leading authority in rating airlines and airports, because of the exceptional work of our employees. In 2017, Turkish Airlines was also the recipient of the "Best Business Class Onboard Catering," "World's Best Business Class Lounge," and "Best Business Class Dining Lounge."

Most recently, we have been recognized as a 2018 Five Star Global Airline in APEX's Official Airline Ratings. As these accolades are all based on passenger votes, they reflect our detailed and personal approach to our guests.

Of course, reaching this level in our passengers' eyes requires keeping up with the latest trends and developments in the industry. Turkish Airlines never ceases to innovate and always looks to improve upon its already impressive products and services.

The recently launched "Fly Good Feel Good" program is a product of this approach. In partnership with Dr. Mehmet Oz, the producer and host of "The Dr. Oz Show," this program aims to improve passengers' travel experiences as a whole with a focus on wellness. Dr. Oz's short in-flight videos provide passengers with expert advice on how to stay healthy while traveling.

In addition, Turkish Airlines' business-class passengers experience 5-star restaurant-quality cuisine prepared through the "Flying Chefs" program and can take advantage of our new "Exclusive Drive" program, which picks up the business class passenger with a private, chauffeured limo to and from the airport.

Of course, the greatest investment always goes to our most coveted asset, our employees, on whom Turkish Airlines relies to provide its unique flight experience. Being fully aware that Turkish Airlines crews are the key factor of the world-renowned Turkish Airlines service quality, we regularly train our crews and keep them informed of new trends and innovations in our industry. The recently inaugurated Turkish Airlines Flight Academy serves as a regional training center that provides training not only to Turkish Airlines but also to several other airlines.

Are there plans to add new routes for Turkish Airlines as you look to the future?

As a global airline, we are always looking to add new routes to our network. With the new airport due to open in late 2018, we will have more slots to allocate to other countries, who in turn will allocate slots to us, resulting in more destinations to fly to in several of our key markets.

In 2017, we added new routes to Phuket in Thailand, Conakry in Guinea, Kharkiv in Ukraine and two cities in Russia: Voronezh and Samara. In 2018, new routes will include Freetown in Sierra Leone, Samarkand in Uzbekistan, Aqaba in Jordan and Krasnodar in Russia.

Would you provide an overview of Turkish Airlines' fleet and its plans for investment for new planes?

The fleet of Turkish Airlines, one of the youngest in the world with an average age of 6.5 years, contains 223 narrow body planes, 90 wide body planes, and 16 cargo planes, totaling 329 aircraft.

Our fleet consists of both Airbus and Boeing aircraft and we are in negotiations with both suppliers to expand our fleet with more wide body jets as the completion date for Istanbul New Airport nears.

What is the current state of travel and tourism in Turkey and what do you see as Turkey's strengths and advantages when it comes to tourism?

As one of the top tourist destinations in the world, Turkey continues to draw a multitude of visitors for many reasons. In the first nine months of 2017, over 26 million people visited Turkey.

Our country consistently ranks as one of the most beautiful and diverse countries in the world. A land of great historic and cultural depth, Turkey is a true amalgam of flavors, styles and experiences. It offers a vibrant landscape, distinct culinary offerings and a gateway to history while being unique with its ability to embody both the ancient and modern. It continues to be a "bucket-list" destination for travelers of all backgrounds, interests and ages.

As a hub for air transportation, we are sitting atop a strategic crossroads. With a central location between the large landmasses of Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa, we have evolved into a major hub and naturally attract a multitude of travelers. From Istanbul, travelers can reach 38 countries in three hours or less. Working at full capacity, Istanbul's Atatürk Airport is one of the busiest airports in Europe with nearly 1,500 takeoffs and landings performed daily.

How do you define the keys to being an effective business leader?

I believe the key to being an effective business leader is to set an example for your employees that brings with it a promise of human warmth, empathy and understanding. Successfully leading a global airline that brings people and perspectives of the world together can only be made possible by a team that is both competent and harmonious. I think being a business leader is no different to being captain of a sports team. All members of the team have to fulfill their missions effectively in order for it to succeed. Businesses are similar. In order to provide a service that goes beyond expectations, you first have to achieve perfection among your colleagues. In the airline business, this rings even truer.

We like to consider Turkish Airlines as a family of approximately 50,000 people. "Different Together" is our motto, which reflects our diversity and differences as well as our ability to act as one. All of our communications and evaluation processes rely heavily on the family concept. Of course, as a family we stand united under all circumstances. We have experienced our bonding power first hand in many cases and I am rightfully proud to call all my colleagues "my family."

What are your priorities as you look to the future of Turkish Airlines?

Being accustomed to double-digit growth rates, we are eager to move to our new home, Istanbul New Airport in October 2018. As I have mentioned earlier, this facility will be a milestone in our growth. With a 200-million passenger capacity and a strategic location to take advantage of, it will open a new chapter for Turkish Airlines. We are currently busy with the process of preparing to move our operations to the new airport and planning how best to utilize this facility to reach even further.

Financially, we have exceeded all of our expectations in 2017 so far. The third quarter was the best ever in our company's history. All our figures are going up and 2018 looks even brighter.

Looking ahead to medium term goals, in 2023 – the centennial of our Republic – we plan to have a 450-aircraft fleet with a projected annual passenger figure of 120 million and a 4 percent share in global aviation, which can only be made possible with Istanbul New Airport. ●