Taiwan Taoyuan Seeks Success

by Ken Donohue

When Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport (Táiwān Táoyuán Guójì Jīchǎng—IATA: TPE), formerly known as Chiang Kai-shek International (CKS), or Chung-Cheng (Zhongzheng) International, opened in 1979, it was Asia’s largest airport. But that was more than 30 years ago, and history counts for little. In the last 15 years alone, six new airports have been built in East Asia. And with a growing list of passenger amenities, these airports, along with others in the region, are billing themselves as the perfect hub—linking Asia with Europe, North America, and Oceania. Can TPE compete with these ultra-modern airports, some of which are perennially ranked as the best in the world? The government of Taiwan thinks so, which is why it is investing billions of dollars over the next 20 years to position Taiwan Taoyuan as an airport of choice for airlines and their passengers.

Previously, Taipei’s airport was Songshan (Tāiběi Sōngshān Jīchǎng—TSA), located within the city limits of Taipei, and built originally as an air base during Japanese occupation in 1936. Following World War II, the airfield was taken over by the Republic of China Air Force, and in 1950 became a joint military-civilian aerodrome. With a move to a manufacturing and export-led economy, Taiwan experienced explosive growth through the Seventies and Eighties. This created increased demand for air travel, for both passengers and cargo. It also meant that Songshan became overcrowded. With a single runway and a night-time curfew, and the city quickly expanding around it, expansion of the airport was not practical. Thus, a new international airport, one of ten major construction projects undertaken by the Taiwanese government, was built.

Located 31km (18mi) west from Taipei City, near the northern coast of Taiwan, the new airport was built with parallel runways. Known today as Terminal 1, the sole terminal building was modeled on that of Washington
Dulles, and featured 22 gates, 11 of which were located on the north concourse, with the other half positioned on the south concourse. The core building is located between these two concourses, and together they form a large ‘H’. But as with many growing cities, the complex reached its capacity in only ten years, so a second passenger terminal was added.

Terminal 2, with a similar layout, opened in 2000, though initially only the gates on the south concourse were used. The northern gates became operational five years later. EVA Air (Chángróng Hángkōng; BR/EVA—Airways February 2011 & December 1999), Taiwan’s first private international airline, was the first carrier to operate out of T2. China Airlines, Taiwan’s largest airline (see page 22), uses both T1 and T2, with most long-haul flights to Europe and North America operating from T2 while T1 handles East Asian destinations. Two ‘Skytrain’ people mover lines on opposite sides of the airport whisk travellers between the two terminals.

Aircraft at the north concourse gates almost exclusively use the north runway (05/23), while 06/24 serves those on the opposite side of the terminal. Two taxiways allow aircraft to transit between the north and south sides. TPE experiences two busy
periods each day, from 0600 to 0800, and again from 1400 to 1600. Most flights from North America arrive early in the morning, allowing for onward connections throughout Asia, returning to Canada and the USA that evening.

Both industry and government officials in Taiwan recognize that TPE, the island’s largest airport and main international gateway, is lagging behind others in the region. But because of land and cost constraints a new airport in Taipei is not being considered. Instead, a massive expansion of the existing airport, including a third runway, a larger cargo area, and a another passenger terminal, are planned.

Fueling traffic growth is improved relations between the Republic of China (Taiwan’s official name) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In recent years, China and Taiwan have allowed more nonstop flights between the two sides. Today, more than 40 cities in mainland China are served from Taipei, with the number expected to grow in coming years.

In addition, a preferential trade agreement between Taiwan and China was signed in 2010, increasing both business and leisure travel across the Taiwan Strait. To underscore how significant this market is to the airport, four years ago—the first year scheduled flights were allowed—the number of arrivals from cities in mainland China was only 320,000. In 2011, that number had soared to nearly two million. Both China Airlines and EVA Air are bullish about the future of cross-strait traffic, and on most routes employ wide-body aircraft to meet demand.

While the number of travellers arriving from mainland China cities continues to increase, Hong Kong and, to a lesser extent, Macau still represent the largest destinations to and from Taipei. Combined, those two cities provide almost 25% of the airport’s total traffic. And not surprisingly, Hong Kong’s Cathay Pacific Airways has the greatest presence of any overseas carrier at Taipei.

The original T1 is undergoing a major $57 million renovation, which when complete by the end of this year will have the look of a brand-new building. Gone is the Dulles lookalike. Designed by Japanese architect Norihiko Dan, the exterior of the building draws its architectural influence from East Asian culture, with a long, sloping roof. The renovated interior will add 196,000m² (2.1 million sq ft) of space, enough for an annual flow of three million more passengers, with—naturally—an enlarged shopping area.

The planning process for what will be known as Terminal 3, including an environmental impact
assessment and design phase, is currently underway, with construction expected to begin in 2014. This $2 billion structure is anticipated to be operational in 2018, and will bring the airport’s total annual capacity to 60 million passengers. A satellite terminal will also be constructed with the potential for 64 additional gates. And by 2030, the airport’s new layout is expected to be complete, with a third runway located north of the existing Runway 05/23.

Sensibly, access is also being improved with a $97 million Mass Transit Railway from Taipei’s city station. When completed in 2013, the journey to the airport will take 35 minutes, compared to 50 minutes by bus or car. Departing passengers will be able to check bags at the city station, and proceed directly to the boarding gates upon arrival at the airport. While the rail link will offer a convenient option for travellers, ironically it was the inauguration of the country’s high-speed train line that all but killed domestic air service. Formerly there were several small airlines connecting cities on the 395km (245mi)-long island, but with the train taking less than two hours to travel from north to south, flying no longer makes sense. Now there are only a handful of domestic flights, most serving Taiwan’s offshore islands (Airways, February 2011).

While TPE faces stiff competition from others in the region, it is taking the steps to develop into a true transit hub. “This huge investment in infrastructure that we are seeing today will better position the airport to achieve this goal,” says Yuan-hung Ting, a senior business planning specialist for the Taoyuan International Airport Corporation, pointing out that Taipei is geographically well situated to serve southeast and northeast Asia. But the airport authority knows that geography counts for only so much. “We need to develop the airport as a choice for people to land,” admits Ting. “Singapore offers a swimming pool and showers, so we need to elevate passenger amenities so people will choose Taipei.”

On previous visits, the airport looked drab and run-down. Now, it’s hardly recognizable. And much of that credit goes to Ever Rich Duty Free. More than just an airport retailer, Ever Rich
completed the remodeling in the airside area without government financing, and has changed the face of the airport’s public services areas.

Four waiting lounges have been created, including a quiet, relaxation area with complimentary massage chairs and surrounded by trees and plants. Another is the brightly colored Hello Kitty area, while another, the e-library, is an acknowledgment of Taiwan’s high-tech industry. Here, a recharging station allows you to lock up your electronic device and charge it while you explore the rest of the airport. And it’s often the little things that make a difference in a passenger’s experience—such as the brightly colored nursing room that serves as a comfortable retreat for mothers to tend to their babies, with complimentary diapers and other supplies.

The China Airlines-owned Novotel at Taipei Taoyuan International Airport is five minutes from the airport and adjacent to the Chung Cheng Aviation Museum, built in 1981 by Boeing. Complimentary buses also run between the airport and the museum, which displays a number of aircraft, including this Grumman HU-16 Albatross.

Located in Terminal 2, the Taiwan Green Wall is an outline of the island formed by 3,000 varieties of seasonal plants, which help to purify the air inside the building.

Staffed information desks, and roaming information consultants, are strategically located to assist passengers. Free Wi-Fi access is available throughout TPE, unlike the situation at many other major airports. While the shops here are filled with the usual international brands, Ever Rich has made a commitment to showcase a vast array of Taiwanese products, including teas, foodstuffs, and work from local artisans. If you tire of shopping, you can indulge your senses in an orchid garden, or an art gallery that displays Taiwanese art; or marvel at the Taiwan Green Wall, a 36m² (400sq ft) map of Taiwan, made up of thousands of varieties of living plants. And if you have a lengthy transit between flights, you can even take a complimentary half-day city tour.

“We are competing with Hong Kong and Singapore, and so our goal is to create a better experience,” says Sharol Yeh, the company’s manager of airport operations. “We need more passengers, but the government is doing a good job at making the aviation industry a priority.”

Indeed it is. Aside from massive redevelopment, the government has also committed to creating an ‘airport city’. The first step in that bold plan was for China Airlines to relocate its corporate office and operations center, known as CAL Park, to the airport.

This included the construction of a 360-room hotel owned by China Airlines, but operated by the internationally recognized Novotel brand. Only a few minutes from the terminals, accommodation is four-star. For aviation aficionados, some rooms offer fantastic views of both runways. As the closest hotel to the airport, it is already convenient, but will become even more so in a year’s time when the airport–city MTR line is complete, as one of the stations will be at the hotel.
Located next to the hotel is the Chung Cheng Aviation Museum, with a wide array of displays and aircraft that celebrate Taiwan's military and civilian aviation history. A small, enclosed observation area is located above the museum, affording excellent views of aircraft movements on Runways 05 & 06.

Given Taiwan’s geographic location and highly developed manufacturing and export economy, it isn’t surprising that Taipei is a large cargo hub, ranking in the top 20 worldwide for cargo volume. TPE is served by two air cargo terminals. The largest, and handling about 45% of Taoyuan’s cargo, is Taiwan Air Cargo Terminals Ltd (TACTL). Founded in 1999 and majority-owned by the China Airlines Group, its terminal occupies more than 130,000m² (1.4 million sq ft) of space, and is equipped with 12 freighter parking spaces. The other cargo terminal is operated by the Evergreen Group (parent of EVA Air), which established the Evergreen Air Cargo Services Corporation in 2000, and is well integrated into Evergreen’s global air, sea, and land transport network. Currently more than 1.6 million tonnes (3.5 billion lb) of cargo are handled at the airport, and the volume is expected to triple in the next two decades. To accommodate this growth, redevelopment plans for the airport include an expanded cargo zone at the north end of the airport.

Can Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport compete with the likes of Hong Kong International Airport, Seoul-Incheon, or Singapore’s Changi? Time will be the judge. But if will is any indication—the will to improve the airport's infrastructure, and the will to create a better passenger experience—then surely the airport will succeed.✈

Fast Facts
Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport
台灣桃園國際機場
桃園機場
(Tâi-wān Tâoyuán Gúojì Jīchǎng)

| IATA: TPE | ICAO: RCTP |
| Location: 16.7nm (30.9km) west of Taipei City |
| Traffic (2011) | |
| Passengers: 24,947,551 |
| Cargo (tonnes): 1.6 million |
| Aircraft movements: 163,199 |
| Formally opened: February 26, 1979 |
| Owner: Government of the Republic of China |
| Operator: Taoyuan International Airport Corporation |
| Website: www.taoyuan-airport.com |