Ask anyone outside Germany what that country’s three busiest airports are, and you will probably hear something like this: Frankfurt, Munich [München], and Berlin. They would be correct on the first two; but while Düsseldorf may not have the same cachet that Berlin does, it is in fact Germany’s third busiest airport. What Düsseldorf International (IATA: DUS/ICAO: EDDL) lacks in fame it surely makes up in convenience. A ten-minute, $2 train ride from the city’s central station takes you to the modern airport train station. From there, a monorail SkyTrain—suspended from a 2.7km (1.7mi)-long elevated track—whisks passengers to the terminal, with a stop at the car park. Even travelling from Frankfurt to Düsseldorf is convenient, thanks to Germany’s efficient and extensive rail network.
Düsseldorfer Airport's train station was built in 2000 in the same style as the terminal buildings, which includes high-glass ceilings and sweeping views of the surrounding area. The station is unique in Germany in that 350 stops are made each day, and an extra 50 if you include Düsseldorf's S-Bahn suburban commuter train. Sonja Schröder, media and internal relations spokesperson for the airport, is quick to point out that not even Frankfurt is that well connected.

Today’s airport is on a site where an airship hangar was erected by the city of Düsseldorf in 1909, on Golzheimer Heide (heath) near Lohausen, on the east bank of the Rhine [Rhein]. This hangar was leased to DELAG, which operated the first aerial cruise by an aircraft carrying passengers when the Deutschland (LZ 7) set out on June 28, 1910. That year, an airfield was prepared to the east of the Zeppelin shed, which was enlarged and used by the military during the Great War (the airship structures were dismantled in 1919).

The terms of the Treaty of Versailles prevented any use of the airfield until 1926, when the Paris Agreement loosened some of the restrictions. On April 19, 1927, Deutsche Luft Hansa began a service to Berlin, using four-passenger Junkers F 13s. In September 1939, civil air traffic was halted when the German army occupied the demilitarized Rheinland and took control of the airport. During World War II, Allied bombing destroyed most of the airport buildings. In 1945, US troops occupied the airport for a brief time before command was transferred to the Royal Air Force (RAF). German workers, under the supervision of the British, reconstructed one of the three runways and rebuilt the former Luftwaffe administration building as a terminal. BEA (British European Airways) began service from London to Düsseldorf on April 4, 1949, and the following day SAS opened a service from Copenhagen. On December 1, 1950, the airport was returned to German control, when the state of Nord Rhein-Westfalen and the city of Düsseldorf assumed ownership.

A decade later, in 1961, the airport received a big boost when LTU, now one of Germany's largest airlines, established its base at Düsseldorf. The Sixties also saw the construction of the airport's Terminals A and B. In 1996, a fire swept through the terminal, resulting in 17 deaths. The conflagration, which was unwittingly started by welders working outside the building, slowly burned in the walls of the terminal, and remained undetected for some time. Significant damage resulted, and the passenger handling area was rendered unusable. Subsequently, the terminal in front of Piers A and B was reconstructed, and work completed in 2001.

Today, a simple yet poignant memorial on the airport's third level commemorates those who lost their lives in the tragedy. And, as Schröder tells Airways, because the fire provided valuable lessons in the way airports are constructed, other airports' officials now come to Düsseldorf to learn fireproofing techniques.

If Düsseldorf's advantage is its proximity to the city—only 8km (5mi) away—in a cruel paradox its disadvantage is that same attribute. Concerned about the growing airport and its impact on the surrounding area, neighbouring towns, along
with the Ministry of Economy, Commerce, and Traffic, agreed upon the Angerland Agreement, which would limit the airport's expansion. As a result the airport is open only from 0600 to 2300, and slots are restricted to 38 movements an hour. “We understand the need to respect the people that live near the airport,” says Schröeder, “but this really hampers our ability to grow. We have airlines that want to use DUS, but we have to refuse.” The airport has been built to handle 22 million passengers per year, but operates well below that level with about 15 million annually. Schröeder admits that Düsseldorf will never be a 24-hour airport, but suggests that more slots per hour may be permitted, although currently there are no firm plans for this.

The airport is consciously aware of its environmental impact, and has implemented measures to reduce noise pollution. Airlines are encouraged to operate quieter aircraft, and are accordingly charged lower fees if they do. Initially, the airport wanted to ban noisy airplanes, but that was not feasible. Schröeder admits that it is difficult to determine if this measure has had much of an impact, but says that some airlines that operate noisier aircraft will pay more, in turn allowing the airport to return funds to the community.

Under the leadership of Dr Rainer Schwartz, the airport’s CEO, the relationship between the airport and the surrounding neighbors has improved immensely. He has brought a host of fresh ideas which benefit not only the airport, but also the entire region. DUS established the Burgher Buro, a small house on the airport grounds, where residents can meet and have answered questions about the airport's operations, development, and noise concerns. The Burgher Bus is another tool. “It is important that we communicate with the people that live near the airport, and the bus allows us to travel to neighboring communities,” says Schröeder. “We take their concerns seriously.” Proof of that is the €25 million ($33.5 million) spent on new windows for homes located near the airport. Schröeder also notes that the neighbors actually look forward to the bus, and residents are actively using a newly-initiated noise-reporting program on the airport's website.

Another innovative idea that DUS implemented with great success is a user fee for movements. As with most airports around the world, slots are coveted and often protected by dominant carriers, but because of the limited number available at Düsseldorf, the airport was forced to be creative. “Slots are very important at our airport, and we don’t have enough” says Schröeder, “so we can’t stand airlines reserving slots without using them.” According to Schröeder, some airlines were not satisfied about this new policy, but the airport could not continue allowing some traditional airlines to limit competition.

This ‘fee for movements’ policy came into effect late in 2003, and has been very successful, as airlines returned unused slots—4,500 from Lufthansa alone. This allowed other, smaller carriers, such as Germania Express and Air-Berlin, to use the airport. This is a unique idea for Europe and the rest of the world, and Schröeder tells Airways that other airports are interested in implementing a similar measure. While this policy has benefited smaller airlines, and ultimately the passenger, some airlines have considered court action against the airport, but DUS is not worried because the state government
approved the measure.

“Initially, the attitude from airlines was very negative, but that has since changed,” says Schröeder. “Lufthansa was one of the biggest culprits, but over the past few months our slots department has worked with that airline to try and find new routes at times that the airline might not have considered.” As a result, Lufthansa now operates a noontime
flight from Düsseldorf to the Spanish Mediterranean.

A parallel runway was constructed in the Nineties, but because of restrictions on development this is located too close to the main runway for simultaneous movements.

There is a cargo operation at the airport, but it does not play as big a rôle, such as at Munich, Cologne (Köln)/Bonn, and Frankfurt, because of slot restrictions and nighttime closure. Nevertheless, strong growth was recorded last year, not least because of a new service by Emirates SkyCargo, which is offering twice-weekly Boeing 747 freighter service (operated by Atlas Air) from Dubai (with a weekly extension from Hong Kong).

Düsseldorf is the largest airport in the region, but it is an airport of short distances.

The airport consists of three terminals, A, B, and C, all of which are connected and form a half-circle. Opened in 2003, Terminal C completed the airport's largest construction project, and continued the same design and 'feel' of the renovated A and B terminals. Combined, the three terminals offer 156 check-in counters.

Luftansa, DUS’s major operator, uses Terminal A, along with a dozen affiliated airlines. The B and C complexes are used by other carriers such as Air-Berlin and LTU International, the hometown airline.
(top) The main entrance greets arriving vehicles; (above) an Air-Berlin Airbus A380 departs on a scheduled service; (left) a Sky xxxxxxxx taxiing to its designated runway; (bottom left) people arriving at the central check-in hall, and (below) people awaiting arrivals line the observation deck atop Terminal B.
LTU, Düsseldorf’s ‘hometown’ airline, is the second biggest carrier at DUS, and uses Terminal C, along with a handful of charter operators. The airline has recently initiated new routes from the airport, including a seasonal summer service to Vancouver, and also Beijing and Shanghai, the latter prompting the airport to provide Chinese-language signage throughout the terminal.

Unsurprisingly, Lufthansa is the dominant airline, responsible for 3.7 million passengers annually at DUS.

Late in the Nineties there was a move to privatize the airport. Today, the Düsseldorf Airport Corporation, owned equally by the city and a company called Airport Partners, manages the airport.

While growth is limited, DUS is moving ahead with a project called ‘Airport City’. Land next to the terminal was recently purchased from the British Army, and where barracks once stood, a modern business park, complete with a nine-story hotel connected to the terminal, is under construction. The hotel is expected to be operational in 2006, and the entire project slated for completion in 2012.

If Düsseldorf is all about convenience, it is also an aviation aficionado’s dream. While many airports impose restrictions on public access to viewing of airside operations, DUS actively encourages it. The airport is equipped with two spectacular observation decks. One is on top of the terminal’s Concourse B, and the newest is located at the airport train station, affording excellent views—and photographic opportunities—of the main runway. This observation area is equipped with a large outside viewing deck, as well as an indoor seating lounge. A nominal fee of €2.00 ($2.70) allows access to both observation decks, and a ride on the airport’s SkyTrain. And with over 70 airlines serving 170 destinations, visitors won’t leave disappointed. A recently-opened shopping arcade in the terminal, along with the decks, has allowed the airport to become a recreational destination in itself.

‘From train to the plane’ is one slogan that the airport has used to distinguish itself. But this isn’t an empty promise—DUS delivers. From the moment you step off the train, or park your car, the airport will charm you with its fresh and welcoming feel. So, if your travels take you through Düsseldorf International, allow some extra time—you will be impressed, and don’t forget to visit the observation decks with their stunning views.