

The final approach

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The men and women who flew at the dawn of the jet age were rich and rather daring. Fifty years ago, you could buy a new Mercedes-Benz for the same price as a first-class return ticket from New York to Frankfurt. Now, any model from the prestige German marque costs several times as much as the most pampered transatlantic flight.

More saliently, about 27 people died out of every million carried on the far less technically sophisticated aircraft that were flown then. Today, the rate is fewer than one per million. As the airline industry is fond of saying, flying is safer than it has ever been. In the US, more people now die in a recreational boat accident than in an air crash in a typical year.

But a closer look at global air accident figures reveals a less comforting picture. Data compiled for the Financial Times by Ascend, a consultancy whose air accident database is used by most of the world's largest insurers to set rates for the premiums that airlines have to pay, show advances in air safety have been far from uniform.

Consider the record of the world's 1,000-odd commercial airlines. Just 25 of those carried about half the 11.5bn passengers flown in the past 10 years, according to Ascend, whose data stretch back to just after the second world war. Of the 25, five carriers together had six accidents – Brazil's Tam had two, the former of which had only one fatality. The most recent was the 2009 Air France crash in the Atlantic in which 216 passengers died.

In total, 873 passengers were killed. That number – which does not count deliberate acts of violence such as hijacks or sabotage – is just 13 per cent of the 6,566 air passenger fatalities recorded in that decade. In other words, the 10-year fatality rate for these 25 busiest airlines is 1 in 13.2m. Put a different way, 0.000008 per cent of the passengers they carried, were killed.

Such figures have big financial implications. The cost of insuring a passenger jet, for example, has fallen considerably during the past 20 years, says Paul Hayes, Ascend's director of air safety. "It probably costs more to buy the pretzels on a flight than it costs to insure it now," he adds.

The record of many of the other hundreds of airlines flying each year is far less impressive, however, especially in certain parts of the world. During the past 40 years, safety records have picked up in every region except one. In Africa, the rate has not only failed to improve, it has deteriorated. In the 1970s, Africa had 190,000 flights per fatal crash. In the 2000s, it took only 160,000 for a fatality to occur.

The reasons are well understood. "It is a combination of poor infrastructure, lack of resources in governments to implement global standard safety oversight and insufficient investments in training," says Giovanni Bisignani, head of the International Air Transport Association, which represents some 230 airlines worldwide. Iata runs a safety audit programme that Mr Bisignani says has started to produce some recent improvement in Africa.

But the problems in parts of the continent remain daunting. "In the Democratic Republic of Congo, they use widened sections of the road for a runway," says Mr Hayes. "In [the city of] Goma, they lost a large length of one runway to a lava flow. You've had a few aircraft run into an unforgiving wall of lava on the runway."

The safety divide is also evident elsewhere. Airlines in Latin America, a region whose booming economies have begun to make it a big draw for investors, has the second-worst crash rate after Africa. Russia and the former Soviet states also have a very poor record. Russia itself had the worst "hull loss" (aircraft write-off) rate in the world as recently as 2007, says Iata.

Safety experts blame insufficient regulatory oversight of the hundreds of airlines that sprang up following the collapse of the Soviet Union, though Iata says there have been recent improvements. Even so, that region, like others, has a long way to go to beat western Europe and North America, the only two regions to see their safety rates soar during the past 40 years.

The availability of ever more advanced aircraft – with sensors that can warn pilots of impending doom, be it a nearby mountain or a dangerously fast runway approach – have made flying in these areas significantly safer.

But until the rest of the world catches up, the skies beyond the west will remain much riskier for millions of travellers every year.