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Autor: Condom, Pierre / Veuthey, Charly
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passenger numbers. Geneva is faring better and is reporting a slight rise, but both airports are faced with the same situation. They were virtually abandoned by Swiss after the airline decided to concentrate its operations in Zurich. Now they are seeking ways of wooing new airlines to their location.

The market decides

Are the Swiss poor airline operators? There is no doubt that Swissair management made mistakes, but a number of aviation experts such as Pierre Condom (see interview) believe that "Swissair would have gone belly-up sooner or later". To Condom it is clear that airlines are undergoing a much-needed global shakeout. Europe is too small for more than twenty airlines – and as many hubs – offering international routes. The global aviation crisis in the wake of September 11 merely accelerated the shakeout process.

The future of Zurich-Kloten airport also depends very much on the integration of Swiss in the Oneworld alliance dominated by British Airways and American Airlines. Within this alliance, Zurich could become a European continental platform for routes to Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

Basle and Geneva airports must also adapt to the changing global market. By charging lower airport taxes than Zurich, they are aiming to secure their future by attracting budget airlines. 

"They were in love with Swissair"

Pierre Condom, Director of airline magazines "Air et cosmos" and "Interavia", is a well-known international aviation expert. We met him in his office at Geneva airport to discuss the future of – or at least the outlook for – Switzerland's airline industry.

"Swiss Review": What was the reaction to the grounding of Swissair outside Switzerland?

Pierre Condom: For passengers and the public the sky fell in. If ever there was an airline in which people could trust, it was Swissair. People knew that the plane would be clean and on schedule, and they could rely on the quality of in-flight service, even if the cabin crew's manner was sometimes less friendly than one could have wished.

Do the Swiss love Swiss?

No, I don't believe so. They were in love with Swissair. They admired the Swissair culture – a mixture of success and quality. Swiss has no culture. You can't create that from one day to the next. Also, I think customers had to change their attitude after Swissair's collapse. At the expense of Swiss.

Will the airline continue to exist?

Swiss will probably still be around in two or three years. But in ten or fifteen years? It's

doubtful, given the general trend in civil aviation. More European mergers are expected, possibly between Air France, British Airways, Lufthansa and perhaps also Iberia. There may well still be planes with the Swiss logo, but they will probably belong to a larger group.

Is Swiss needed just so that Swiss people can travel?

The regrouping trend will bring about a radical change in route networks. Not every current hub will find a role within these new networks. There are over twenty airlines in Europe, and as many hubs. Initially, traffic will be concentrated round a specific number of large hubs. In Switzerland there is only one: Zurich. But is there room for Zurich, Munich, Frankfurt, Paris, Rome and Milan in Europe – a geographical region that is extremely small in air travel terms? Since some of these hubs will probably lose their international connections, Swiss travellers will have to rely on transit flights outside national borders. However, with the exception of Zurich residents and on a few routes leaving from Geneva, all passengers travelling with Swiss are obliged to change in Zurich. From the passenger's standpoint it makes no difference whether they fly via Zurich, Frankfurt, Rome or Paris. On the contrary, he can benefit from the competition!

Does Zurich have any chance of remaining an important international airport?

An important airport, certainly. But not an international airport for long-haul flights. It is relatively easy to bring to a standstill in political terms. Moreover, it lacks a sufficiently strong resident airline. To be important, a hub needs a resident airline with an extensive network of routes and

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Airline industry expert Pierre Condom: "If ever there was an airline in which people could trust, it was Swissair."

high traffic volumes. Zurich has neither. The population is too small, and if you compare the international destinations offered by Swiss and those offered by Air France in Roissy, the imbalance is clear.

Are Swiss airports facing a crisis?

In the medium term, the three airports can survive on regional flights. Air traffic is set to grow by an average of 5 percent per year over the next 25, 30, and perhaps 40 years. At some point in time the approach zones will lack sufficient air space, and the number of planes will need to be reduced. At present, passengers are regrouped by flying them into large hubs. In the future, this will probably be done overland. That is the long-term risk. And airports that offer connections to the large hubs could suffer as a result.

Later, airports could win back their long-haul flights. The most popular routes concentrate passengers in hubs because this is the most economic form of passenger transport. But when traffic increases again, the

time will come for a lucrative market for point-to-point connections from secondary to primary destinations or from secondary to secondary destinations. At some point in the evolution of hubs, secondary hubs will once more offer direct connections but at a different price!

Is Zurich best-placed among Switzerland's three airports?

Zurich holds the long suit due to its geographical location, facilities and economic potential. But Zurich's economic equilibrium is fragile. Geneva airport has a very low number of transit passengers. Its users are customers from the Geneva region and from neighbouring France. This traffic really "belongs" to Geneva since the passengers have no other choice. Zurich, on the other hand, has a very high percentage of transit passengers who have nothing to do with Zurich. This traffic can be rerouted from one day to the next. This was also one of the major concerns of people in the Zurich region when Swissair was grounded.

And Basle?

The advantage of Basle airport is that it belongs to two countries. It is situated in a very important economic zone and is the subject of major investments. Apart from that, the hub created by Crossair was completely artificial. Due to the presence of a resident (domestic) airline, expansion was pushed ahead to create a hub near Crossair's maintenance bases, personnel and administrative headquarters. Basle is in the same situation as Zurich.

Interview: Charly Veuthey

Translated from German