



“Now everyone can fly”? Scheduled airline services to secondary cities in Southeast Asia



John T. Bowen Jr

Department of Geography, Central Washington University, 400 E. University Way, Ellensburg, WA 98926-7420, USA

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 1990s, almost no world region has experienced faster air traffic growth than Southeast Asia. Much of that growth is attributable to new low-cost carriers (LCCs), which collectively accounted for nearly half of scheduled airline capacity on routes from Southeast Asian cities in 2013. Yet despite the expansion of traffic and the proliferation of carriers, airline traffic remains strongly concentrated in the key hubs of Bangkok, Singapore, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Ho Chi Minh City, and Manila. Similarly, trunk routes, defined as sectors with more than 0.01 percent of global airline capacity, continue to account for 54 percent of all seat capacity in the region. LCCs have helped to perpetuate these imbalances as budget airlines like AirAsia have disproportionately favored already well-served markets. Such patterns are important because aviation plays an outsized role in Southeast Asian intercity transportation and in its economic development. The analyses reported here indicate that while the growth of aviation since the late 1990s has been impressive, that growth so far has not done much to improve Southeast Asia's entrenched patterns of spatial inequality.

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1. Introduction

Ranked by scheduled airline capacity, several Southeast Asian routes are among the most densely trafficked in the world. The corridors between Singapore and three other regional capitals – Jakarta, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur – have been leading routes for decades, but now there are new aerial arteries in the region such as the link between Jakarta and Surabaya. Measured by scheduled seats per week, the Indonesian domestic trunk route rose from being the 330th busiest city-pair in the world in 1998 to 10th in 2013, two places above Chicago–New York City (Author's analysis of OAG, 1998 and OAG, 2013). The Jakarta–Surabaya link is emblematic of a region in which air traffic has grown faster since the 1990s than in any other large part of the world except South & Central Asia (Fig. 1). Yet few analyses of air transportation networks in Southeast Asia have been published, and the studies that have been produced mainly concern the region's key hubs and are rather dated in light of the recent explosive growth of air traffic (e.g., O'Connor, 1995; Bowen, 2000; Rimmer, 2000), or the analyses subsume Southeast Asia in the larger Asia–Pacific region within which developments in China and the rest of Northeast Asia

predominate (e.g., Bowen, 2014b; O'Connor and Fuellhart, 2014; Vowles and Mertens, 2014).

This article focuses squarely on Southeast Asia, which is defined to include the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Timor-Leste (Fig. 2), and examines how growth through 2013 has altered the geography of air services in the region. In particular, how have the places historically marginalized in the region's transport systems been affected by the recent flourishing of the Southeast Asian airline industry? Cities such as Singapore and Bangkok have long been globally significant hubs, but in their hinterlands even moderately large cities have had weak services. Has recent growth ameliorated uneven patterns of accessibility?

The title of the article, “Now everyone can fly”, comes from the advertising slogan of AirAsia, a Malaysia-based low-cost carrier (LCC). The airline has emerged as one of the most influential in a region long dominated by the likes of Singapore Airlines and Thai International. Its low fares have made air travel affordable for the first time to a growing proportion of Southeast Asia's middle class (Ahmad, 2010). The same is true across much of the region, including Indonesia, where by 2013 among the airlines plying the aforementioned Jakarta–Surabaya route were Lion Air, Citilink, and AirAsia Indonesia – three relatively new LCCs. The lower fares ushered in by budget airlines have undoubtedly made air travel

E-mail address: bowenjo@cwu.edu.

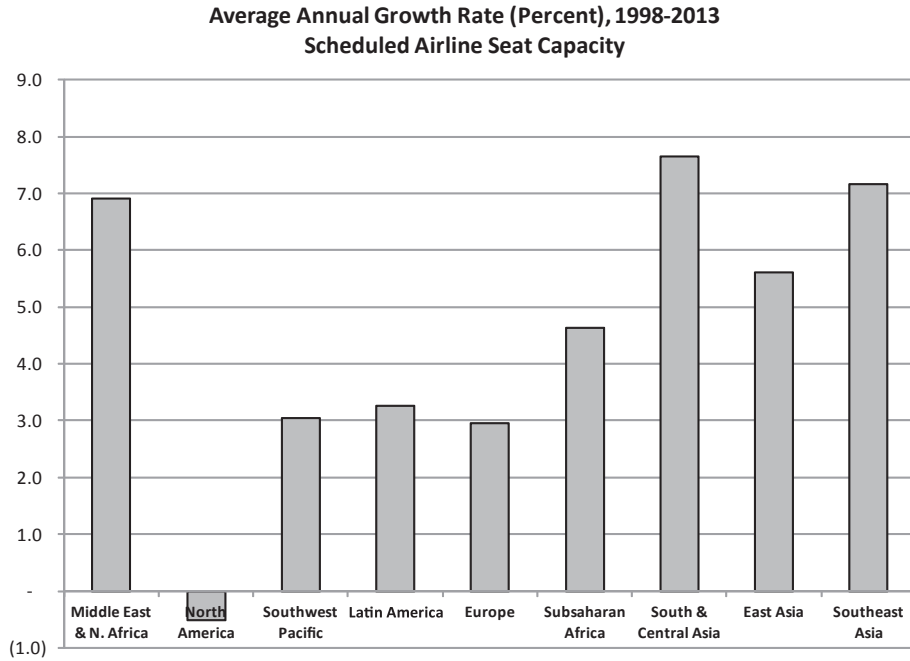


Fig. 1. Scheduled Airline Capacity Growth by Region, 1998–2013. Scheduled departure seat capacity per week for all carriers combined. Sources: OAG (1998, 2013).

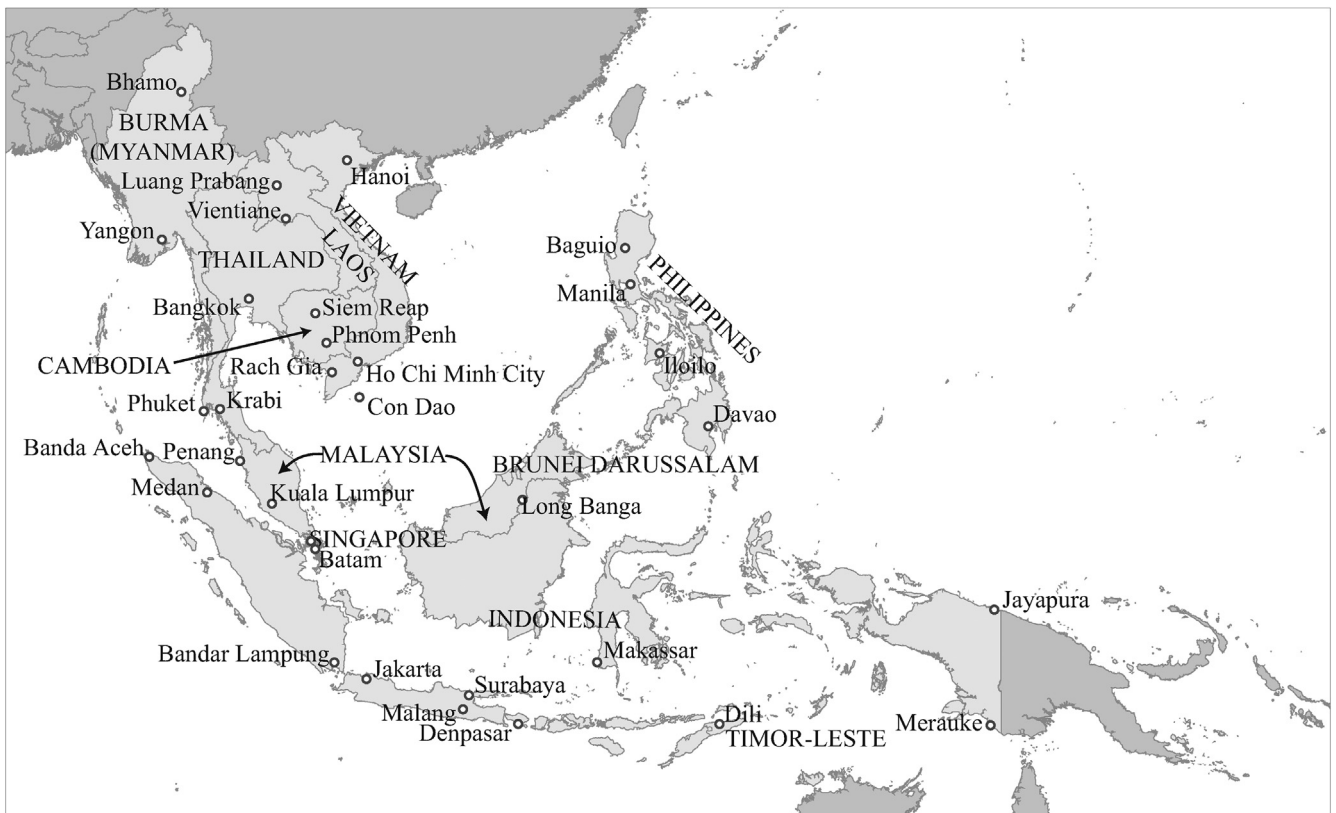


Fig. 2. Southeast Asia. The labeled places are mentioned in the text.

more accessible for more people in the region, but to what degree do the networks of these and other airlines extend to the region's periphery (defined as communities away from the core urban regions of Bangkok, Singapore, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, and Ho

Chi Minh City)? The analyses below answer this question.

Since the 1990s, numerous studies have used the air transport system as a means of discovering the architecture of the world city system and patterns of power in the global economy (e.g., Cattan,

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