SKOPJE AIRPORT
on the trail of Alexander the Great

since the airport’s new terminal opened in 2011, activities are used by the majority of passenger flights. (All photos author)

macedonia’s culture dates back more than 6,000 years, with archaeological findings in the city of Scupi and its Kale Fortress from 4,000 BC. Skopje, the capital and largest city of Macedonia with a population of approximately one million, is surrounded by hills and spans more than 12 miles (20km) alongside the Vardar River. The city is the heart of the Balkan region on an Historic north-south trade route connecting Belgrade with Athens. Although agriculture remains the major source of income for the country, Skopje is developing as a major commercial and logistics hub, and in recent years the return of a stable political situation has revitalised art, culture and sport in the country.

aviation in macedonia
Skopje’s original airfield was in the neighbourhood of Aerodrom, a suburb that is now one of the most densely populated in the city. Commercial aviation began in 1929 when Yugoslav carrier Aeroput’s French-built Potez 25/2 aircraft began serving the city from Belgrade, the capital of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Flights initially continued onwards to Zagreb but, during the following year, the route was extended south to Thessaloniki, Greece, and it reached Athens in 1933. By 1935, Aeroput was serving the city as the final stop on the Belgrade-Nik-Skopje route and was also flying Belgrade-Skopje-Bitola-Thessaloniki. Vienna was served from Skopje via Zagreb and Belgrade, and the airline used aircraft ranging from Caudron C.449s to Lockheed Model 10A Electras.

following the outbreak of World War Two and the bombing of Belgrade in 1941, Aeroput’s fleet was destroyed and operations were reduced to almost to zero. The airline resumed flying in 1947 using a fleet of Junkers Ju 52s and Douglas C-47 Skytrains. Through the following four decades, JAT Yugoslav Airlines grew to become one of the most modern and forward-looking airlines in the Balkans and was one of the few to become prominent in Macedonia. Airbus A320-214 OE-LDD (c/n 2146) is being prepared for its return trip to Vienna.

Austrian Airlines offers a daily service using a mix of Airbus and Fokker jets. Airbus A319-112 OE-LDD (c/n 2146) is being prepared for its return trip to Vienna.

other airlines, Hungarian carrier Wizz Air has become prominent in Macedonia. Airbus A320-213 HA-LYK (c/n 6394) is one of the airline’s newer aircraft, which has Sharklets fitted.

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seven aircraft parking stands (later increased to 15) that were large enough for JAT’s Douglas DC-3s, Convair 340s, Sud Aviation Caravelles, Douglas DC-4s, McDonnell Douglas DC-9s and Boeing 727s. Bigger jets including JAT Boeing 707s and McDonnell Douglas DC-10s also visited the airport occasionally during the 1970s and 1980s.

at skopje airport, skopje is enjoying success under the stewardship of Turkish management company TAV Airports. luigi Vallero outlines the history of the facility and the airlines that have contributed to its growth.

When it opened, the terminal had four check-in counters, parking space for 300 vehicles, and a capacity of 200,000 passengers per annum. The number of check-in desks was soon doubled and terminal capacity increased to 400,000.

A cargo facility was constructed that could deal with 4409 tons (4,000 tonnes) of airfreight annually.

The single runway could handle 25 aircraft movements per hour and the apron had eight aircraft parking stands (later increased to 15) that were large enough for JAT’s Douglas DC-3s, Convair 340s, Sud Aviation Caravelles, Douglas DC-4s, McDonnell Douglas DC-9s and Boeing 727s. Bigger jets including JAT Boeing 707s and McDonnell Douglas DC-10s also visited the airport occasionally during the 1970s and 1980s.

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Great Airport, sparking controversy as neighbouring Greece considers the ancient king, commander and explorer a part of its heritage.

To further boost airport infrastructure in the country, in 2008 a contract was signed with the Turkish company Tav Aitken Ventures (TAV) Airports, which awarded a 20-year concession to manage and enhance the facilities at both SKP and at the second international gateway in Macedonia, Ohrid St Paul the Apostle Airport. The Turkish consortium took over on March 1, 2010 with the objective of making the airport one of the main hubs in the Balkan region.

Skopje today

On September 8, 2011 a brand new (430,556 sq ft (40,000 m²)) terminal building with a capacity of 4mppa was opened. A vast improvement on the previous building, which is still used for administrative purposes, the new facility was built by TAV Airports in just 18 months. The building is on two levels, with arrivals and 23 check-in desks on the ground level. Security, passport control and departures are one level up. In the departures hall after passport control there are two ATU (TAV’s retail brand) duty-free shops and a number of 24/7 eateries ranging from the BTA Cakes & Bakes café to the Beerport pub, the Cafe Inn and a Burger King. A branch of the local Halkbank AD Skopje, a post office, airline, travel agents and car rental offices complete the services available to passengers. The terminal has six passenger lounges.

As part of further infrastructure works, TAV constructed an administration building, access roads and car parks, a fire-fighting station, and extended the runway by 1.640ft (500m). Cargo facilities have also been upgraded, with a new 20,000 sq ft (2,000m²) facility equipped to handle all air cargo including A400s equipped with new containers. A shuttle bus between the city and the airport was introduced in 2010, and car rentals improved. In total, TAV has invested EUR100 million at the two Macedonian airports it manages. The enhancements made by TAV resulted in SKP being awarded Best Regional Airport, Europe in the under two million passenger category by Airport Council International (ACI) in 2012 and 2013. It also ranked among the 10 best in Eastern Europe at the Skytrax World Airport Awards, held in Paris in March 2015.

The number of passengers using SKP has increased from 312,492 in 1990 to 1,208,359 in 2014, although growth rates have fluctuated over the years. Steady increases have taken place since 2010 when TAV Macedonia took over the airport, with 2014 seeing growth of 22.7% over the 984,407 passengers that passed through last year. In the first three months of this year the number of passengers using the airport was 264,213, an increase of 29% over the previous year, and the number of aircraft movements grew by 1% from 2,520 to 2,532.

Swiss carriers are also prominent due to the large number of Macedonians working in the country: Edelweiss Air, Air Berlin’s Swiss subsidiary Belair; Helvetic Airways and HolidayJet (operated by Germania Flug) all connect the city to Zurich, while Swiss International Air Lines (operated by Austrian Airlines Bordair Dash 8 Q400s) connects the Macedonian capital to Geneva. Other European carriers include Adria Airways (using Bombardier Regional Jets), Air Serbia (ATR-72s), Alitalia (Cityliner’s Embraer 195), Austrian Airlines (Fokker 100s and A320s), Croatia Airlines (A319s and a summer service using Bombardier Dash 8 Q400s), Germania Flug, JetAirfly and Nexion Airlines. The only long-haul route from SKP is flyDubai’s twice-weekly 737-800 service to Dubai International, which offers connections to the Far East and Australasia.

A growing future

With the region now politically stable, the co-operative nature of the public-private partnership between the Macedonian government and TAV Macedonia has contributed to the growth in traffic at SKP. TAV’s management contract at SKP still has many years to run, and the company along with the city of Skopje and the government are anticipating a continued strong performance in the future.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Kiryl Tupchuk, New Business Development, MD Macedonia: Seket Karakaya, Marketing Manager, TAV and Sara Trigolovska Tourism Macedonia, and their teams for their help and support in preparing this article.