

SKOPJE AIRPORT

on the trail of Alexander the Great

In landlocked Macedonia, 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.

▼ Since the 4mpps new terminal opened in 2011, airbridges 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 in 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 centre for metal-processing and has other diverse industries such as chemicals, textiles and printing. Its location means the city is a 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 29/2 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-Niš-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 as JAT Jugoslovenski Aerotransport (JAT Yugoslav Airlines) 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 more modern and forward-looking airlines in the Balkans and was one of the few to

► Since the demise of its national airlines, Hungarian carrier Wizz Air has become prominent in Macedonia. Airbus A320-232 HA-LYK (c/n 6394) is one of the airline's newer aircraft, which has Sharklets fitted.

► Boeing 737-529 Z3-AAM (c/n 25249) is the only reminder of the collapsed MAT Airways. The aircraft, wearing MAT and Kon Tiki Skies titles, has been in store since 2011.

► 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.



operate aircraft built in the west. It continued to link Skopje to a number of domestic and international destinations until the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

In 1968 a location near the village of Petrovec, 13 miles (20km) east of Skopje, was chosen to be developed as the city's new airport. Skopje (SKP) is the largest and busiest of the two international facilities in Macedonia. 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.

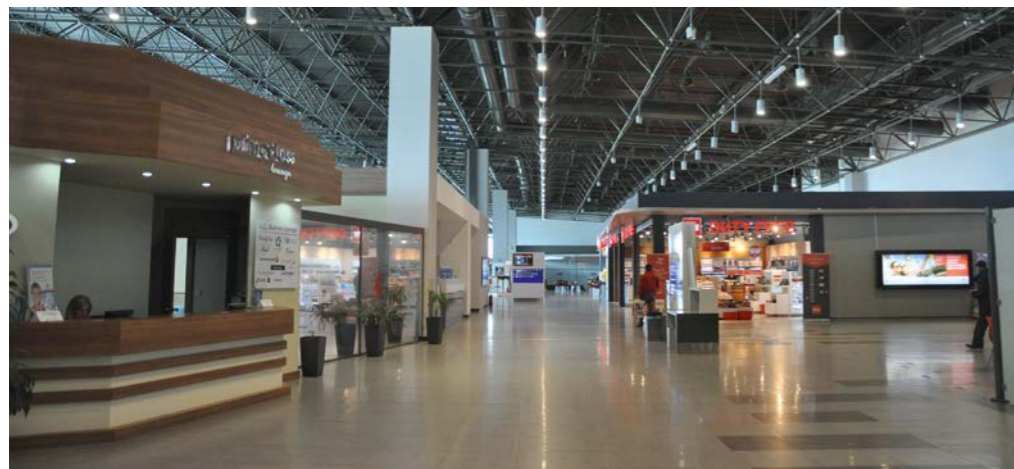
The single runway could handle 25 aircraft movements per hour and the apron had

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-6s, McDonnell Douglas DC-9s and Boeing 727s. Bigger jets including JAT Boeing 707s and McDonnell Douglas DC-10-30s also visited the airport occasionally during the 1970s and 1980s.

✈ Airport Statistics

ICAO:	LWSK
IATA:	SKP
Location:	41° 57.40'N 021° 37.37'E
Elevation:	781ft (238m)
Runway:	16/34, 9,678 x 150ft (2,950 x 45m)
Frequencies:	Tower: 118.5
Website:	skp.airports.com.mk





Following the collapse of Yugoslavia, the independent Republic of Macedonia was created and JAT retrenched to Serbia. Palair Macedonian Airlines was founded in 1991 to serve international communities where large numbers of Macedonian expatriates lived. Starting with a single Tupolev Tu-154, the airline soon added Fokker F-28s and Fokker 100s to its fleet. A fatal accident occurred on March 5, 1993 when Palair Flight 301 to Zürich, operated by a Fokker 100, crashed seconds after take-off from Skopje. Investigations revealed that the aircraft had not been de-iced and 83 of the 97 people on board were killed. Palair suffered further with renewed competition from JAT Airways, which restarted flights in Macedonia after UN sanctions on the former Yugoslavia were lifted in 1996, and the airline ceased flying in September of the same year.

Prior to that, on June 23, 1994 another airline - Macedonian Air Transport (MAT) - began connecting Skopje to Zürich using a 737-200. Having revised its name, MAT Macedonian Airlines gained flag-carrier status in 2000 and renewed its fleet with Bombardier CRJ 900 and 737-500s. The carrier's network was expanded to include Amsterdam, Berlin, Düsseldorf, Hamburg, Istanbul, Rome and Zürich. In December 2008, Eurocontrol banned MAT

from entering German and Italian airspace because of unpaid air traffic control fees. That year Skopje (SKP) handled 658,367 passengers, with MAT accounting for 37% of the traffic at the airport.

Despite indications that JAT Airways might take a majority shareholding in MAT Macedonian Airlines, the latter went bankrupt on September 1, 2009, leaving the country without a local carrier. A new company trading as MAT Airways was established later in 2009 but it closed down in 2011. Its sole remaining aircraft, 737-529 Z3-AAM (c/n 25249) sporting a joint MAT/Kon Tiki Sky livery, remains impounded at SKP today. In December 2006 the Macedonian Government named SKP Alexander the



▲ The departure lounge features a typical array of shops, bars, restaurants, duty free, and a lounge available to Business Class passengers and frequent flyers.

▼ Cargo traffic is growing at Skopje. RAF-Avia Antonov AN-26s are typical of the ad hoc freight movements that the airport now sees regularly.

◀ Check-in occupies the majority of the landside area of the ground floor of the terminal.

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

To further boost airport infrastructure in the country, in 2008 a contract was signed with the Turkish company Tepe Akfen Ventures (TAV) Airports, which was granted 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

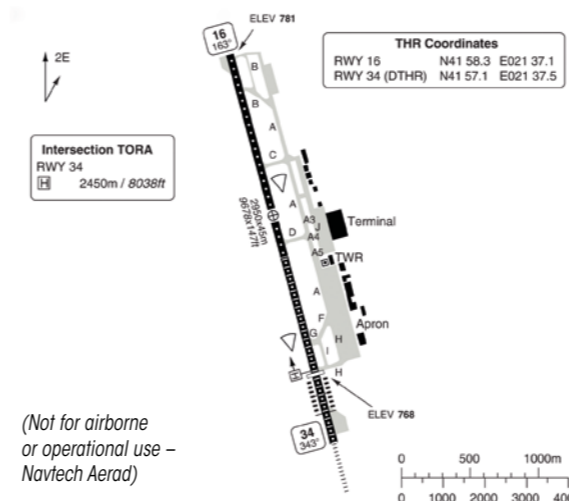
On September 8, 2011 a brand new 430,556sq ft (40,000m²) terminal building with a capacity of 4mppa was opened. A vast improvement on the previous building, which is still used for administrative purposes, the new facility was built by TAV Airports in just 18 months.

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 ATÜ (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 airbridges.

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 29,063sq ft (2,700m²) facility equipped to handle all air cargo including refrigerated and perishable goods. A shuttle-bus between the city and the airport was introduced in 2010, and taxi services were improved. In total, TAV has invested EUR110 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.



Traffic Figures

Year	Passengers
1990	312,492
1995	583,053
2000	1,005,852
2005	525,965
2010	716,000
2014	1,208,359

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 in 2013. 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 17% from 2,515 to 2,932.

▲▲ A statue of Alexander the Great is prominent on the ground floor of the modern, airy new terminal building.

Airlines and destinations

Since 2010 the number of destinations served directly from SKP has increased by 17 to 28; 27 in Europe and one in the Middle East. New routes started this year have included Geneva, Friedrichshafen, Oslo, Barcelona, Hamburg and Nürnberg. The summer schedule includes increases in direct flights to Germany and Scandinavian countries and to holiday destinations such as Split in Croatia.

The strong historical relationship between Macedonia and Turkey is demonstrated by Istanbul being the busiest destination served with both Turkish Airlines and Pegasus Airlines flying to SKP year round from their hubs at Istanbul Atatürk and Sabiha Gökçen. Charter services to Turkish holiday destinations such as Antalya are also provided by Corendon, Pegasus and SunExpress. The busiest routes from SKP are to Istanbul, which sees 15.7% of all traffic, followed by Vienna, Zürich, Basel-Mulhouse, Malmö, London Luton, and Belgrade.

The most popular countries passengers travel to include Turkey (17% of traffic), Germany (14%), Switzerland (14%), Sweden (12%), Austria (8%) and Italy (8%).

Although Macedonia no longer has a national flag carrier, Wizz Air has taken over the void left by defunct MAT. The Hungarian LCC now serves an array of destinations from SKP, particularly those popular with the Macedonian expatriate community, using three locally based Airbus A320s. Wizz Air's destinations include Barcelona, Basel Mulhouse, Paris Beauvais, Milan Bergamo, Brussels Charleroi, Cologne Bonn, Dortmund, Eindhoven, Friedrichshafen, Gothenburg Landvetter, Frankfurt Hahn, London Luton, Lübeck, Malmö, Memmingen, Nürnberg, Oslo Sandefjord, Stockholm Skavsta, and Venice Treviso.

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 Zürich, while Swiss International Air Lines (operated by Austrian Airlines Bombardier 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 Nesma 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. ☑

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