

Air transport is fast becoming a critical pillar for Rwanda's trade, tourism, and connectivity, positioning the country as an emerging African hub.

According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the aviation sector contributed an estimated US\$160.1 million to the national GDP in 2023 while supporting 42,000 jobs.

Airlines such as RwandAir, Kigali International Airport, and related services directly employ around 2,900 people and add US\$8.9 million to GDP. Tourism linked to aviation remains the biggest driver, contributing US\$124.9 million to GDP and creating 29,000 jobs. International tourists arriving by air spent an estimated US\$688 million locally on goods and services.

The 2023 data air analysis, highlighted, passenger traffic also saw a sharp rise, with international departures reaching 447,400 in 2023—a 21.2 percent increase from the previous year. Nairobi, Entebbe, and Brussels ranked among the top destinations, with more than half of travelers flying to other African countries.

At least one in ten passengers departing Kigali was bound for Nairobi, underlining its importance to regional connectivity.

According to the air data traffic report, cargo operations added to this momentum, with over 16,500 tonnes of goods moving through Rwanda's airports in 2023, strengthening the country's role as a trade hub.

Speaking at the Aviation Africa Summit & Exhibition in Kigali on September 4, RwandAir CEO Yvonne Makolo stressed that partnerships with international and African carriers are essential to boost skills, networks, and capacity. She noted that after a difficult year marked by airspace restrictions in the Democratic Republic of Congo, RwandAir is rebounding strongly. New routes to Mombasa and Zanzibar are planned, while demand remains high on long-haul services to London and Doha as well as on regional routes to Entebbe, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, and Bujumbura.

Makolo added that affordability has improved, with the average Rwandan now needing 124 days of work to afford a plane ticket—an encouraging shift that is making air travel more accessible. The airline expects passenger numbers to rise to 1.2 million in the current financial year, up from just over 1 million in 2023/24.

RwandAir is also pursuing an ambitious growth strategy under the Transport Sector

Strategic Plan 2024–2029. The airline operates 16 aircraft but plans to expand its fleet to 21 by 2029.

Two Boeing 737-800s were recently delivered, and a wide-body Airbus A330-200 is expected by late 2025. Its destinations are projected to increase from 23 in 2023/24 to 29 by 2028/29.

Supporting this growth is the construction of Bugesera International Airport, located 40 kilometers from Kigali. The US\$2 billion project, developed in partnership with Qatar Airways, is designed to relieve pressure on Kigali International Airport and establish Rwanda as a regional aviation hub. Once complete, Bugesera will feature a 3.8 km runway and a modern terminal with an initial capacity of 1 million passengers annually, expandable to 14 million by 2032.

IATA's analysis highlights the sector's central role in Rwanda's long-term development strategy. With rising passenger numbers, expanding routes, and major infrastructure investments, aviation is not only connecting Rwanda to the world but also powering its economic transformation.