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The Show that demystifies Economics

Transport Economy – part 4

Air Transport©

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As with all the different ways of transporting people, there are just as many ways to transport cargo! Today, we will look at air cargo, or the transportation of goods, most often in containers, by airplane. Some companies transport cargo exclusively, such as Federal Express, UPS or the Luxemburg-based Cargolux; but many other commercial airlines such as Air France, KLM, Lufthansa and Air Canada, also have large cargo divisions.

The aircraft used for cargo are not always the same as for regular commercial flights, as nowadays the airlines prefer to employ the latest aircraft for passengers, and the older ones for freight. For example, the 60-year old Douglas DC-3 is still in use by many carriers. What happens most of the time is that when a plane has become outdated for commercial flights it is then refitted for freight transportation. The biggest aircraft currently used for large shipments are the Russian-made Antonov An-225 Miriya and the Antonov An-124. The Miriya is the longest and heaviest plane in the world, but only second in wing span, as the H-4 Hercules seaplane is wider in that respect.

The transport of freight by air really began to take off in the 1970's, and since then it has experienced steady growth, even though during these past few years the growth has declined slightly. In 2013, the top 10 cargo airlines were the American company FedEx, with 16 million tons of freight transported; followed by UPS with 10 million tons. Finally, Emirates Sky Cargo completes the podium also with 10 million tons delivered. The world's busiest airports for cargo traffic are led by Hong Kong International Airport, through which 4 million tons are transited, followed by Memphis International Airport in Tennessee, and Shanghai Pudong International Airport. The leading European airport for cargo is Frankfurt, in 9th place with 2 million tons.

As for commercial flights, in 2014 the busiest airports were Hartsfield-Jackson in Atlanta, Georgia with 96 million passengers, followed by Beijing Capital International Airport with 86 million passengers, and London Heathrow, which handled 73 million passengers. An interesting fact is that China and the United States are both large continental countries, so that if we count only the international passengers, then Dubai airport shoots up to first place with 69 million passengers passing through its gates, and London comes in second.

As for the world's largest airlines, there are different ways to figure this, either by how much money they make, how many planes they have, or by how many passengers they handle. In terms of 2014 revenue, the American Airlines Group was the leader with 42 billion dollars, followed by Lufthansa with 39 billion. In terms of passengers carried, it was again the American Airlines group taking the lead. Looking at British Airways, which often ranks within the top 10, it posted revenue of 11 billion pounds in 2013, it has a fleet of 295 aircraft, and employs about 38,000 people... This concludes our topic on air transport.