IATA Location Codes

How does IATA decide what 3 letters to assign to an airport?

The rules for the assignment of location identifier codes are laid down in IATA Resolution 763. The main objective is to ensure that each three-letter code is unique. A code is assigned to:
- an airport receiving air services by an airline.
- a location which must be identified and published for intermodal transportation,

When selecting a new location identifier, the procedure is to:

- as a first choice, select an unassigned code using the first three letters of the location's name; and
- as a second choice, choose an unassigned combination preferably starting with the first letter of the location's name
- The applicant may suggest to IATA preferred codes, from the available list

In addition, there are two other considerations. If only one airport serves a metropolitan area, only one code will be assigned to both the airport and the city in question. For example, the airport code for Geneva Airport and the city of Geneva are both GVA. If, on the other hand, the city/ metropolitan area has more than one airport, each airport will have its own code and the metropolitan area may either use its own code or one of the airport codes. For example, Washington, D.C., is served by three airports: DCA, BWI and IAD. To avoid confusion the IATA city code, and Metropolitan area code is WAS. It is important to note that the creation of a Metropolitan area coding designation or inclusion of an airport to an existing Metropolitan area code is decided by an industry poll.

Does IATA issue codes for other locations in addition to airports?

Location codes are assigned to a location (airport or other location like a railway station) if a commercial airline needs to fly to that airport or the location will be part of an intermodal ticketed journey (e.g. a railway station, for example, for a passenger's Air plus Rail ticketed journey). This is also why location codes are only issued based on a commercial airline's request to IATA. Usually, the first airline flying to the location requests the code. IATA also issues codes for cities and metropolitan areas if they are served by more than one airport.

When did IATA begin assigning location identifier codes?

Airport coding first began in the 1930s, and airlines typically chose their own two-letter codes. By the late 1940s, there were too many airports for the number of 2-letter codes available, and the system shifted to the three-letter codes we have today. Los Angeles International Airport, for instance, was originally just "LA," but became LAX in 1947. IATA stepped in during the 1960s when the airlines decided they needed a standardized process to avoid confusion.

How do the IATA codes differ from codes issued by the International Civil Aviation Administration (ICAO) and other aviation regulators?

IATA (3-letter) location codes are used for strictly commercial airline purposes and are issued at the request of an airline(s). IATA will also issue codes (at airline request) for non-airport locations, most commonly for train and ferry stations where there is an intermodal connection.

ICAO 4- letter location codes are issued for more flight operations purposes and thus are issued to both commercial and non-commercial airports, among other differences.

How many location codes are there currently?

There are over 17,000 possible code combinations and currently approximately 11,300 codes are assigned.

On average, how many codes does IATA issue per year?

Approximately 40-50 codes are assigned annually.

Why do the location codes for Canadian airports all seem to begin with the letter Y?

This convention dates back to the pre-WW II era of aviation. It is believed that this is related to the 2-letter identifier codes for weather stations or radio location beacons. However, this convention is no longer automatically observed.

How did IATA get the responsibility to issue airport codes?

This occurred following certain airline working groups being formed, and the decision was taken that IATA, as the trade association for the global airline industry, would manage the codes on behalf of the industry.

Are new location codes issued once a year or throughout the year?

Airport code requests are addressed on as they come in. It is an online process managed through IATA's Global Delivery Center.

Is it possible to change an airport code?

Assigned three-letter location identifiers are considered permanent and are almost never changed –and then only with strong justification, primarily concerning air safety. One example from history is when the designator for Washington Dulles International Airport was changed from DIA to IAD to avoid any confusion with nearby Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA).