

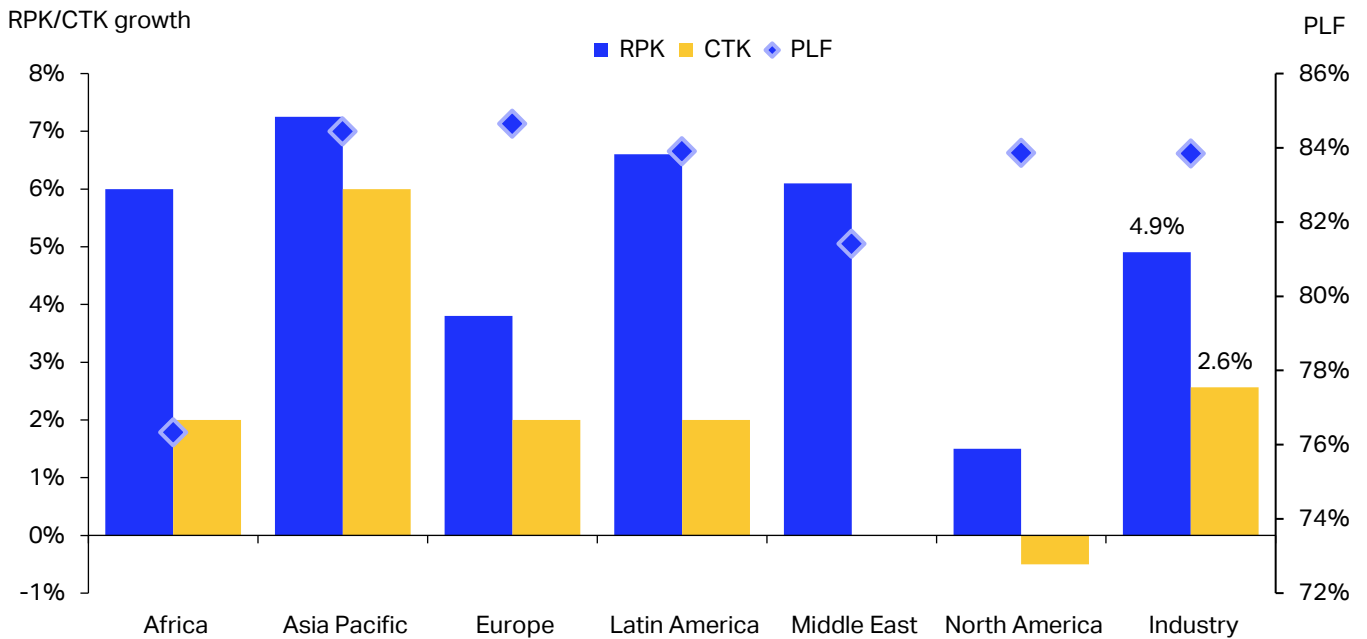


Chart of the Week

12 December 2025

Passenger and cargo grow despite supply constraints

Passenger, cargo growth rates and passenger load factors, %



Source: IATA Sustainability and Economics.

- Global air travel, measured in Revenue Passenger Kilometers (RPK), has outpaced economic growth consistently over the past three decades, expanding on average 2.3 times faster than global GDP. However, this trend has moderated in recent years. RPK growth is expected to align more closely with GDP in 2025-2026 and grow 1.5 times the pace of GDP. Capacity constraints are behind much of the relative deceleration in air travel. Delays in aircraft deliveries, maintenance backlogs, and labor shortages, have limited airlines' ability to scale operations in response to growing demand. We nevertheless expect passenger traffic to increase by 4.9% YoY in 2026. Hypothetically, if RPKs had expanded without constraints, maintaining the historical 2.3 x GDP pace, growth could have reached 7.1% YoY in 2026. Supply constraints do, on the other hand, boost the load factor, which looks set to reach a record high of 83.8% in 2026. This benefits airlines' yields and profits in an otherwise challenging operating environment.
- Global trade has been surprisingly agile, despite the volatile trade policy environment. Air cargo came to everybody's rescue as a critical enabler of rapid adaptation, ensuring that goods arrived ahead of announced tariff deadlines and facilitating the swift rerouting of China's exports to alternative markets. While trade growth may slow in 2026, air cargo is well-positioned to remain robust, benefiting from AI-driven investment, growing demand for high-value, time-sensitive goods, and the structural shift toward e-commerce. In times of uncertainty, when speed matters most, air freight remains the preferred option. As a result, air cargo traffic is projected to grow by 2.6% in 2026 even though the merchandise trade is expected to show close to no growth next year.

IATA Sustainability & Economics
economics@iata.org

Terms and Conditions for the use of this IATA Economics Report and its contents can be found [here](#).
 By using this IATA Economics Report and its contents in any manner, you agree that the IATA Economics Report Terms and Conditions apply to you and agree to abide by them. If you do not accept these Terms and Conditions, do not use this report.