



OK-JET! The **Tupolev Tu-104A** in **Czechoslovakia**

In November 1957 Czechoslovakian state airline ČSA entered the jet age when it took delivery of the first of six Soviet-designed and -built Tupolev Tu-104A jetliners operated by the airline during 1957–73. **MIROSLAV JINDRA**, whose father served on the type as a navigator, provides a profile of the “Brontosaurus”, as it was nicknamed, in ČSA service



TAM ARCHIVE

DESPITE THE HEAVY rain on Friday, June 15, 1956, a Tupolev Tu-104 of the Soviet Union’s state airline Aeroflot landed safely on Runway 22 at Ruzyně Airport (now Václav Havel Airport) in Prague, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic), with no need for the braking parachute. The aircraft, registered CCCP-L5413, had been produced in the manufacturer’s Kharkiv factory and had made its maiden flight on December 30, 1955. The sleek new jetliner looked majestic and powerful, and quickly garnered the nickname “Brontosaurus” in Czechoslovakia.

The Tu-104, Nato reporting name *Camel*, was essentially a civil derivative of the same company’s Tu-16 *Badger* bomber, the airliner prototype making its maiden flight on June 17, 1955. Although Britain’s de Havilland D.H.106 Comet had gained the crown as the world’s first jet-powered aircraft to enter commercial service, it was grounded at the time of the Tu-104’s visit to Prague in the wake of a series of fatal accidents. Thus during 1956–58 the Tu-104 was the world’s only commercial jet transport aircraft in service.

Jetliner as political tool

The Tu-104’s demonstration in Prague was not just a promotional exercise, however; there was also a clear political agenda. In the early days of Nikita Khrushchev’s premiership of the Soviet Union, Aeroflot sought to expand its network into the West and beyond into more remote regions, this policy also extending to Czechoslovakia, which in 1955 was beginning to explore a thaw in its hitherto frozen international dealings.

For example, the 1955 International Air Transport Association (IATA) conference, held in

New York that October, was chaired by Pan Am President Juan Trippe and was the first time that *Československé státní aerolinie* (Czechoslovak State Airlines — ČSA) and Poland’s *Polskie Linie Lotnicze LOT* had participated in the conference since 1948.

The Tu-104 represented a quantum leap in technology and would bring challenges to the airlines bringing it into service. The new turbojet-powered airliner flew at speeds in excess of 560 m.p.h. (900km/h) at 33,000ft (10,000m), requiring new techniques in numerous operational aspects, including weather forecasting, the storage and distribution of kerosene (at that time a new type of fuel), more precise radio navigation, the use of new airport equipment, the reinforcement and extension of existing airports and, last but not least, the development of onboard catering services, which also saw a significant leap in quality. The Soviets, however, assured the Czechoslovakian aviation authorities that the latter nation’s technicians and pilots would have no trouble mastering these new and demanding techniques owing to their renowned skills. Nevertheless, the introduction of this one aircraft type would become a highly complex issue for Czechoslovakia’s aviation industry.

In July 1956 the Czechoslovakian government signed a CZK100m (CZK — Czechoslovak *koruna*) contract with the Soviet manufacturer, the investment covering the import of three Tu-104As, configured for 70 passengers and fitted with more powerful Mikulin AM-3M turbojet engines. The contract also covered spares and technical equipment needed for the jetliners’ operation, the provision of professional staff training, the installation of new runways and

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP A ČSA promotional route map extolling the virtues of the airline’s Tu-104A fleet; “minimum travel time, maximum comfort”. OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM ČSA’s third “Brontosaurus”, OK-LDC, at Nicosia, Cyprus, in 1971. ABOVE Dawn of a new era — Aeroflot Tu-104A CCCP-L5445. ALL IMAGES VIA AUTHOR UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED