

# Poised for its next chapter

As Air Astana prepares for a new era of leadership and expansion, **Lee Cross** travels to Kazakhstan to catch up with outgoing CEO **Peter Foster** for a behind-the-scenes look at an award-winning airline that continues to face challenges head-on

When *Airliner World* last visited Air Astana's headquarters in Almaty in 2022, the airline was navigating one of the most turbulent periods in aviation history. The ongoing pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic had been compounded by the sudden closure of Russian airspace, both of which had forced rapid operational and strategic change. Fast-forward to late 2025 and the picture looks markedly different.

Today, the Air Astana Group, which encompasses full-service carrier Air Astana and low-cost subsidiary FlyArystan, has shifted to growth mode, with fleet renewal and long-term market positioning now dominating the agenda.

## Point-to-point philosophy

"We came out of COVID pretty quickly," outgoing CEO Peter Foster reflected during our meeting in Almaty. "We were able to argue successfully with our government to restart domestic flying early, which gave us momentum."

The airline then looked at other countries that had opened their borders and began to focus on leisure-oriented routes, launching what it dubbed "lifestyle routes" to destinations such as the Maldives, Montenegro, Phuket and Sri Lanka. These services remain firmly embedded in today's network.

Indeed, the carrier's current network is heavily focused on point-to-point connectivity rather than offering a wide range of onward international connections. Foster was clear that this approach is strategic rather than opportunistic: "You've got the super-connectors like Cathay Pacific, Singapore Airlines and Turkish Airlines, and then the Middle Eastern carriers with huge scale and frequency. We could try to compete, but our yields would end up at the bottom of the pile. There's no point."

Instead, Air Astana focuses what little hub-and-spoke service it has on Central Asia and the Caucasus, where long-haul services feed domestic and regional routes

efficiently. "That's an important market for us, where we see many opportunities," according to Foster.

Foster also explained that they have no intention of joining an airline alliance anytime soon. Instead, Air Astana will continue to focus on favouring targeted partnerships, where codeshare agreements with the likes of Lufthansa, Turkish Airlines, China Southern, Air India and Asiana Airlines provide global reach without the constraints of alliance membership.

## Narrowbody strengths, widebody ambitions

Following the retirement of its last Embraer E190-E2 in May 2025, the Air Astana Group's fleet is now firmly anchored around the Airbus A320 Family. According to aviation, the airline currently has a fleet of 13 A321LRs, 4 A321neos, 3 A321ceos, 11 A320neos and 3 767-300ERs. Meanwhile, FlyArystan has 15 A320ceos and 13 A320neos. >>

*Airbus A321-271N EI-KDD (c/n 7634) was delivered to the airline in June 2018 and is one of four A321neos operated alongside 13 A32LRs, three A321ceos, 11 A320neos and three 767-300ERs AIRTEAMIMAGES.COM/AEROSAEED*





LEFT: Peter Foster started working at Air Astana as president and CEO on October 1, 2005, joining from Royal Brunei Airlines AIR ASTANA

BELOW: In May 2022, the airline celebrated the 20th anniversary of its first commercial flight from Almaty to Nur-Sultan AIR ASTANA



Talking to *Airline World*, chief operating officer Filippos Siakkas said that, before COVID, the airline operated up to seven different aircraft types: "This added unnecessary complexities. Now we have two aircraft families: the A320 Family and the 767. We are comfortable with this structure and are confident we can operate both fleets efficiently and effectively."

The Kazakh carrier was an early adopter of long-range narrowbody flying, taking delivery of its first A321LR, EI-KGA (c/n 8837), in September 2019, on lease from Air Lease Corporation (ALC). Since its arrival, the type has proved transformative, as Foster enthused: "The best decision we ever made was ordering 11 A321LRs. The worst decision was not ordering 50. It has become the mainstay of the fleet, especially our long-haul fleet, and it performs very well for us."

Alongside its narrowbodies, Air Astana continues to operate three Boeing 767-300ERs, with an average age of 12 years. The small sub-fleet, utilised on higher density routes, also includes the final passenger variant to come off the 767 Everett production line, EI-KEC (c/n 42223). But their days are numbered.

After prolonged delays, Air Astana now expects to take delivery of its first of three Boeing 787-9 Dreamliners in August 2026. Originally ordered in 2022, they were due to begin arriving in early 2025, before being delayed until the second half of the year. The first is now scheduled to touch down in Kazakhstan in August. Air Astana also has three 787-8s due, from a direct order with Boeing placed in February 2012, although it's unclear if these will be taken up.



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When quizzed on the incoming Dreamliner's onboard product, Foster confirmed that the plans were still being finalised. However, he did confirm that the business-class seating will differ from the Thomson Vantage-based lie-flat seats found on the A321LR and 767: "It's a great product, but we're not putting that on the Dreamliner. The 787 gives us more flexibility with space, and we'll use that to our advantage."

With excitement mounting for the Dreamliners' long-awaited arrival, shortly after our visit Air Astana announced plans to expand its commitment to the type with five additional 787-9s, plus options and purchase rights for a further 10. Providing Boeing continues to iron out its delivery delays, these

ABOVE: Three Boeing 767-300ERs remain in service but will eventually be replaced by the Boeing 787 Dreamliner, with the first due in August 2026 AIRTEAMIMAGES.COM/ZHANSAR MARALUTY

BELOW: Pratt & Whitney GTF engine issues have impacted the airline group considerably, with up to 13 A320neo Family aircraft grounded during the peak season in 2025 KEY-LEE CROSS



The Air Astana Group includes the full service Air Astana and its low-cost subsidiary FlyArystan, which launched operations in May 2019 AIR ASTANA

"You've got the super-connectors like Cathay Pacific, Singapore Airlines and Turkish Airlines, and then the Middle Eastern carriers with huge scale and frequency. We could try to compete, but our yields would end up at the bottom of the pile"



Air Astana was the first airline to fly the Airbus A320neo in the CIS region AIRBUS/ALEXANDRE DOUMENJOU/MASTER FILMS



should join the fleet between 2032 and 2035. The airline said the new additions will support growth to new destinations and on its high-demand routes to Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

Complementing the Boeing order, the airline also signed a memorandum of understanding for up to 50 A320neo-Family aircraft just a few days after the Boeing deal. If finalised, it would be the largest order in the carrier's history. The deal included 25 firm orders and 25 options, heavily weighted toward the A321LR. Deliveries are expected to begin in 2031.

With the LR prominent in the new deal, ALW asked Foster if the XLR

variant could feature in future plans. "We'll take what we can get." For now, the LR remains the sweet spot: "It's extremely passenger-friendly, delivering strong business-class yields even though there's only 16 seats. It also offers around 50% cost savings compared with the Boeing 757 that it replaced."

### Adapting to change

While the XLR proper may not feature in Air Astana's immediate plans, the carrier's fitting of an additional centre fuel tank (ACT) on its LR variants effectively gave it its own version of the Airbus game-changer. Following the closure of Russian airspace in March 2022,



The first Boeing 787 Dreamliner is due to be delivered in August this year after several delays. It recently expanded the order, adding five additional 787-9s, plus options and purchase rights for a further 10 BOEING

flights to London/Heathrow and Frankfurt were forced to route around, adding around 800nm to the journey. At the time, the LR did not have the range to complete the flight directly, so a technical stop was added at the southwestern Kazakh city of Aktau, taking around 90 minutes.

So, in partnership with Airbus, an ACT was installed, initially on EI-KGF (c/n 10427), before being expanded to six more examples of the 11-strong LR fleet at its in-house

MRO facility in Astana. With the range of its LRs pushed to roughly 4,200nm, the airline was able to return its European rotations to nonstop service and unlock new long-haul opportunities, including Tokyo/Narita, which joins the network in March 2026.

"Everyone said: 'Why don't you just order the XLR?'" Foster said. "First, it's more expensive, and second, at the time it wasn't even in service, so Airbus couldn't actually give a definitive maximum range. However,

LEFT BELOW: Work to install an additional central fuel tank (ACT) to six of its Airbus A321LRs, increasing the variant's range to around 4,200nm, were carried out at the airline's MRO facility in Astana KEY-LEE CROSS

BELOW: The airline's new state-of-the-art flight training centre in Astana was opened in September 2023 KEY-LEE CROSS

we knew that with the modifications, the LR could do exactly what we needed it to do."

Siakkas echoed Foster's statement: "The LR is serving our network very efficiently, and we plan to introduce more LRs with the additional tanks. Some deliveries originally planned for 2026 have moved to 2027, but the intention remains to standardise the capability across more of the fleet."

The closure of Russian airspace has also reshaped the airline's



ABOVE: Inside the EASA-certified training centre are two Airbus A320 Family full-flight simulators with room for more KEY-LEE CROSS

Above RIGHT: The airline prides itself on high service and safety standards KEY-LEE CROSS



network, removing one of its biggest markets, along with one of its biggest competitors, Aeroflot, which, despite still flying to several cities across the vast country, is now unable to connect beyond Moscow as it once did. "We decided to stop flying to Russia altogether," Foster said. "But it was a decision driven by external factors, such as insurance companies being very reluctant to offer their services. We also can't overfly Russia because there are associated risks in case of diversions, etc."

Air Astana had also planned to launch flights to the US, utilising its new 787s. But Foster said that these

plans have been "complicated" by the airspace closure: "Ideally, we would have wanted to have done the US non-stop. But that's not an option for us. So we'll use the Dreamliner on high-demand routes that the 767 currently flies – to Thailand, to Frankfurt in the summer, as well as to Dubai, where there is huge demand. It will also be introduced on our new service to Tokyo, which launches in Spring 2026."

**Operational challenges**

Geopolitical issues aside, one major headache in recent years has been the ongoing fallout from Pratt &

Whitney GTF engine problems. The summer of 2025 was particularly testing, with up to 13 A320neo Family aircraft grounded during the peak season, despite mitigation measures, which included resting engines during the low season.

When asked if the situation was improving, Foster's reply was a blunt "No." Indeed, beyond the main powdered-metal contamination, the PW1100G engines have also faced issues with vibration, seals and oil leaks: "This isn't a short-term problem, it's a multi-year design robustness challenge." Disruption is expected to continue into 2028.



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Foster said that FlyArystan had a "great future" within the group, with the LCC carrying its 20 millionth passenger in October 2025 AIRBUS/HERVE GOUSSE/MASTER FILMS



“Foster’s tenure included navigating the pandemic, airspace closures and major fleet transitions, as well as the launch of FlyArystan, Kazakhstan’s first true low-cost carrier.”

Another challenge for Air Astana is the harsh climate in Kazakhstan and across Central Asia, especially during the winter months. “Kazakhstan has one of the harshest winters in the world,” Siakkas said. “We regularly experience temperatures as low as -40° in Astana.” Add to that heavy snowfall, high-pressure systems near the Caspian

ABOVE: *Along with resting its Pratt & Whitney GTF engines during the low season, the airline has secured spare engines for its A320neo Family*  
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When Foster steps down in March this year, he leaves the Air Astana Group poised and ready for its next phase of growth in Central Asia and beyond  
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Sea and wide temperature variations between destinations and the operational environment becomes especially demanding. Yet the COO does not view these conditions as challenges, but as part of everyday reality: “We have been operating in these conditions for many years. Our people and our systems are tuned to it. Also, our crews are trained to recognise, mitigate and manage the risks associated with extreme operations, and we have an exceptional safety culture that runs throughout the entire operation.”

That safety culture was evident during our visit to the group’s MRO facility and brand-new EASA-certified training centre, which opened its doors in September 2023 at Astana International Airport. The centre is equipped with the latest-generation flight simulators, where pilots from both Air Astana and FlyArystan undertake training, avoiding the need to send its flight crews abroad.

### Low-cost launch

Soon after ALW’s visit, Foster announced that he would be stepping down after more than 20 years as CEO, to be succeeded by chief financial officer Olbrahim Canliel. Foster’s are some pretty big shoes to fill. From surviving pandemics and Pratt & Whitney problems to a trophy cabinet bursting with awards, his tenure has been nothing short of extraordinary.

One of his biggest achievements was the launch of FlyArystan, Kazakhstan’s first true low-cost carrier. Taking to the skies in May 2019, with six domestic routes

operated by a small fleet of ex-Air Astana A320s, FlyArystan has since expanded its network to cover 14 cities in Kazakhstan, as well as destinations in China, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia. By October 2025, the LCC carried its 20 millionth passenger, a number comparable to the entire population of Kazakhstan. “It’s got a great future,” Foster enthused. Could this future include the A321? Foster said that adding a high-density version of the largest member of the A320 Family could eventually feature in its plans.

In 2025, the subsidiary was operating 23 Airbus A320 aircraft, though only 14 were active at the time of our visit due to ongoing engine issues across the wider group fleet. “As these aircraft return to service, that’s where growth will come from organically,” Foster explained.

Despite operating under its own AOC since 2024, Foster said that close synergies between the two carriers persist, especially in engineering and pilot pools. However, he was also keen to point out that the subsidiary is a true LCC, with commercial synergies remaining separate from its parent.

From fleet renewal and infrastructure investment to leadership transition, Air Astana enters 2026 at a pivotal moment. The crises of recent years reshaped the airline and sharpened its strategy. As Foster prepares to hand over the reins, the carrier he leaves behind is leaner, more focused and firmly positioned for its next phase of growth in Central Asia and beyond. **AWI**