

HNA's Suparna commits to Xi'an and Hahn as air freight hubs

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On 28 August, a Suparna Airlines (previously Yangtze River Express, then Yangtze River Airlines) 747-400F departed the central-Chinese city of Xi'an, and headed for Frankfurt-Hahn Airport in Germany, where it landed eight hours later, formally inaugurating the carrier's newest Xi'an – Hahn – Ordos, scheduled cargo route.

Although Suparna, in its previous Yangtze River incarnation had been a common sighting at Frankfurt-Hahn Airport, Xi'an and Hahn were recently designated to become regional hubs in the growing air networks of HNA Group airlines, and traffic will almost surely increase.



In addition to ACMI-leased capacity, Suparna Airlines' fleet currently includes three 747F-400BDSFs, twelve 737-300Fs, three 737-400Fs and two 737-300QCs in freighter-configuration.

To briefly recap Suparna's history, the carrier, which began flying as Yangtze River Express in 2001, last year began its foray into the passenger business, and changed its name to "Yangtze River Airlines". It seemed as if interest in cargo had waned; the carrier reduced the number of 737Fs in its freighter fleet, and ordered a handful of narrowbody passenger aircraft. But in May 2017, things quickly reversed course when the HNA Group launched "HNA Modern Logistics," a subsidiary that promised to funnel resources into developing its air freight business — including an airfreight hub in Xi'an that would rival Memphis.

Shortly after HNA Modern Logistics was launched in May 2017, the HNA Group completed the acquisition of Hahn Airport, and both of the Group's cargo airlines, Yangtze River and Hong Kong Air Cargo, began to show a renewed interest in freighter aircraft. In early June, Yangtze River Airlines changed its name to Suparna Airlines, and inked a deal with Atlas Air Worldwide (AAWW) for the ACMI-lease of a 747F. US-based AAWW commenced service on behalf of Suparna later in the month.

Then in August, AAWW announced a similar deal to operate three 747-400 freighters for Hong Kong Air Cargo Carrier Ltd, the cargo arm of HNA-controlled Hong Kong Airlines. The first of the three will enter service in September 2017, joining Hong Kong Air Cargo's existing fleet of five A330-200Fs. It will serve routes between Asia and the US, and the second and third aircraft to follow in 2018. But the story does not end there, also this month, Suparna Airlines ACMI-leased a 757-200F from SF Airlines, and launched twice-weekly scheduled service between Zhengzhou and Taipei.

Suparna has long carried freight on behalf of China's express companies, and cooperation with SF Airlines is not abnormal. Whether this commercial relationship will strengthen or deteriorate as the two carriers develop competing global air freight hubs, however, remains to be seen. SF Airlines has selected a greenfield in Ezhou, near the city of Wuhan, for its air hub. HNA Modern Logistics' Xi'an site is nearly 800 km to the northeast.

Returning to HNA-affiliated carriers, and looking ahead over the next few years, both Suparna and Hong Kong Air Cargo Carrier Ltd have expressed their intents to grow rapidly, and add widebody freighters to their respective fleets. As we have reported in the past, HNA's leasing subsidiary, Hong Kong International Aviation, still has six 777Fs on deferred-order with Boeing, but there also remains a large supply of parked 747-400Fs on the market that either airline could lease or acquire.

With HNA Modern Logistics at the helm, and lofty goals of upgrading Hahn into a formidable cargo hub, and developing Xi'an into the "Memphis of China", HNA-affiliate airlines are expected to become an even more common appearance at both airports, and elsewhere.