



dnata bases its Dubai apron bus operations on quality

dnata provides ground handling and cargo handling services at both of Dubai's two big airports, Dubai International (DXB) and Dubai World Central (DWC), which also serve as Emirates' twin passenger and cargo hubs. At both of these gateways, but especially at Dubai International, it also provides an extensive, high-quality apron bussing operation. At DXB, this takes in more than 200 buses ferrying passengers to and from Emirates, flyDubai and foreign carrier aircraft (flyDubai is a government-owned airline based at Dubai International's Terminal 2). Meanwhile, at DWC, five COBUS 3000 buses are maintained for passenger handling and another six buses of the same model serve as an Emirates 'diversion contingency' fleet at DWC.

Complementing the previous feature that looked at the evolution of those supplying today's apron buses, *Airside* takes a look at how dnata, the air services provider that forms part of Dubai's Emirates Group, goes about providing apron bus services at its two big and busy hubs

Breaking those DXB numbers down further: 15 COBUS 2500 buses serve Emirates first-class passengers and 31 COBUS 3000 buses serve business class passengers, while 155 COBUS 3000 and 3000XL buses transport economy class passengers on the ramp at Dubai International.

A further 13 COBUS 2500s are operated to take flyDubai business class passengers to and from their aircraft at DXB remote stands.

Finally, another 47 or so staff transportation buses are operated airside by dnata at DXB.

As the above figures show, all of dnata's apron buses are high-end COBUS vehicles – and they keep busy. By way of example, in April this year, dnata's buses made a total of 16,274 passenger trips at DXB (which compares with a figure

dnata has more than 200 apron buses at Dubai International Airport



of 12,784 in September 2020 during the worst of the Covid-19 crisis). These buses served a total of 5,242 flights at remote stands in April (3,446 in September 2020). The Emirates Group has invested heavily in its apron bussing operation. In fact, over just the last three years, it has invested in no less than 134 new COBUS vehicles. The majority of these buses are COBUS 3000XL vehicles, a model whose design is actually the result of collaboration between the Emirates Group and COBUS. The 'XL' of the name stands for extra-long, and this was a crucial aspect of the specification that dnata and Emirates put forward. But the other key requirement was quality, in the vehicle engine, body and its interior fit-out. The intention was to support Emirates' strategy to make a passenger trip on any of its apron buses as pleasurable as the time spent in an airport terminal or on board an aircraft. Thus, comfort is important, as are the high-tech onboard displays and signage outside the bus that not only give passengers details about their but also useful information about the airport and Dubai that would be helpful if they are flying in. Because the XL is so large, an increased number of passengers can sit in comfort compared to a standard apron bus, a vital part of the high-class passenger experience that Emirates and dnata are so keen to offer. And this is a bus used solely for

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dnata's new bus maintenance workshop at Dubai International Airport

economy class passengers – business and first-class passengers take Emirates' and flydubai's smaller COBUS models, which are also of course extremely well fitted out.

Customer feedback channels confirm the appreciation that passengers feel for the apron bussing operation through Dubai. And that appreciation has grown stronger over the last few years because of the investment that the Emirates Group has made in its bussing operation and the quality of the service provided.

Indeed, says Rob Powell, vice president, technical services at dnata, there has been a "seismic change" in the quality of the bussing operation it supplies over just the last five years. The last thing dnata wanted to see was passengers packed into buses like sardines on second-hand city buses (as can be experienced at some airports), and instead it has prioritised creating a high-quality service that can be enjoyed rather than suffered by travellers, he observes.

Will Vasey, vice president, operations at dnata, reiterates this point. The remote apron bussing operation is the first thing that passengers flying into Dubai experience after they land, and similarly is virtually the last thing that outgoing passengers experience before they leave the UAE. The nature of that experience is therefore, he says, key to how travellers will perceive their visit to Dubai as well as their experience of dnata's service provision.

To this end, dnata also ensures that fewer passengers travel on its apron buses than COBUS health and safety requirements

dictate. It takes no more than 70 passengers on its XLs, for example, and no more than 60 on its COBUS 3000s.

Maintenance

In June this year, dnata opened a new maintenance facility at DXB dedicated to the upkeep of its airside passenger buses. The 5,000m² workshop is equipped with the latest systems and equipment not only to maintain the vehicles' bodies and engines but also to look after their onboard technology such as their digital screen passenger information systems, and to maintain the standards of the passenger cabins and upholstery.

Located airside on the southern side of the gateway, the new workshop more than doubled the space available at the previous bus maintenance facility, which dated back to the early 1990s. It is able to comfortably accommodate the extra-long COBUS 3000XL and has new features such as sets of mobile lifting columns, a roof access platform for the safe maintenance of roof-mounted air conditioning systems, and an electronics laboratory to support the repair of passenger information display systems.

Environmental concern

According to Powell, the maintenance facility is a further example of how dnata has prioritised the quality of its apron bussing. But he also highlights dnata's focus on minimising harmful environmental emissions wherever possible. All of the buses used by dnata on the two airports' ramps meet Euro 5 diesel emissions standards, making them some of

the cleanest diesel vehicles operating in the UAE, dnata informs.

Moreover, the Emirates Group has agreed a joint commitment with COBUS to potentially develop sustainable conversion options that would run on electric or hydrogen fuel cell technology. It remains unclear which of these technologies might best suit the bussing operation in Dubai, but a good start on testing the waters will be the deployment of an electric-powered e.COBUS vehicle at Dubai International next year.

Powell hopes to see the bus delivered to DXB by early 2022 but its testing is expected to continue right through the heat of a Dubai summer. The combination of the UAE's high temperatures and the fact that bus doors are opened and closed regularly throughout the day to let passengers off and on means that powering the air conditioning to maintain a comfortable cabin temperature within the vehicle, as well as the bus's drive train, is a challenge.

The test-bed bus will be equipped with numerous data loggers that will allow engineers to monitor the efficiency of electric power for apron bussing and compare it with hydrogen equivalents in this toughest of operating environments.

Seamless, high-quality service

Whether electric vehicles or hydrogen fuel-celled buses are the future for dnata's apron bussing, the maintenance and safe operation of a "seamless, high-quality service" will be the first priority, says Vasey.

Furthermore, in terms of any 'new normal' operating environment post-Covid, dnata's bussing operation in Dubai would seem to be well positioned. As Vasey explains, its large bus fleet and large bus sizes have allowed it to maintain healthy social distancing between passengers on buses during the Covid crisis, while Powell also notes that the informative display screens regularly point out the dangers of Covid and how dnata is advising passengers to minimise their potential exposure to the virus.

These assets support dnata's rigorous disinfection regime that it quickly put in place at the outset of the pandemic in addition to its regular stringent cleaning programme. ■

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