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The Next Step for SAA: An A330-300 Wet-Lease and the Challenge of Regaining Market Share

South African Airways (SAA) has taken a significant step in its recovery and its ambition to rebuild its fleet by wet-leasing a 2016 Airbus A330-300, signalling a commitment to modernise and expand its operational capabilities.

However, aviation analysts caution that lingering struggles with seat configurations and sluggish fleet restoration continue to undermine the airline's ability to reclaim domestic dominance. We took a look at what is happening in SAA's world.

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A New Widebody Joins the Fleet

At the 2025 ISTAT Americas Convention in Phoenix, Aircraft Engine Lease Finance, Inc. (AELF) announced it had acquired an Airbus A330-300 on lease to SAA, serial number 1754. This acquisition underscores AELF's continued support for the flag carrier as it modernises its fleet. SAA's CEO John Lamola acknowledged the milestone, stating the transaction "renew[s] its partnership with AELF as we grow and modernise our fleet".

Additionally, BusinessTech reports that SAA has taken delivery of its first of five new A330-300s, with four more expected later this year and early next. Configured for 249 passengers—46 in Business and 203 in Economy—the aircraft features a staggered 1-2-1 business class layout and enhanced range and payload capabilities.

Strategic Moves Amid Mounting Criticism

The fleet expansion comes at a time when experts like Addison Schonland, founder of AirInsight Group, argue that SAA's current seat configurations are misaligned with the domestic market's needs. SAA's Airbus A320s accommodate just 138 seats across two classes, significantly fewer than U.S. carriers, such as Delta (157 seats) and United (150 seats). In a price and value-sensitive market, the "premium-heavy" layout results in underutilised cabin space and elevated costs.

Schonland had pointed out that this misconfiguration has dampened SAA's competitive edge, contributing to its sharp decline in domestic market share—from over 90% in earlier decades to a fraction of that today. The airline's slow pace in fleet recovery has further abridged choice and capacity in the South African market.

The ripple effects of limited capacity were laid bare during FlySafair's pilot strike in early August, where reduced competition exposed vulnerabilities in SAA's ability to meet domestic demand.

Governance Reset and Fleet Growth Targets

In parallel with its fleet developments, the South African Cabinet has approved a new board for SAA, with Sedzani Faith Mudau as chairperson and Fathima Gany as deputy. The lineup comprises industry experts across aviation, governance, logistics, and finance, tasked with stabilising operations and strengthening governance following SAA's return to profitability over the past two years.

Transport Minister Creecy emphasised the board's mandate: to leverage SAA's debt-free balance sheet and liquidity to scale the fleet from 20 to over 55 aircraft by 2030—using a capital-raising strategy that avoids sovereign guarantees.

What This Means for the Future of SAA

The wet lease of the A330-300 and the arrival of additional widebodies mark SAA's pivot back to long-haul operations and higher-capacity domestic services, signalling a renewed commitment to modernisation. Yet, structural constraints remain: until cabin layouts and seat economics align more closely with South Africa's largely price-sensitive passenger demand, the airline's competitiveness in the domestic market will stay under pressure.

With a new board in place and a fleet expansion strategy on the horizon, SAA stands at a strategic inflection point, one where careful execution in fleet deployment, route restoration, and cabin optimisation will determine whether the flag carrier can truly reclaim its market leadership.

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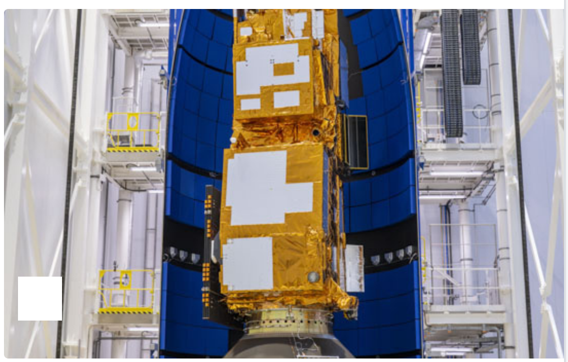

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