

Born in Malaysia in 1964, Tony Fernandes' diverse background influenced his outlook on life. His father, a physician, had hoped that he would pursue a career in medicine, while his mother, a Tupperware saleswoman, taught him the value of human connection and persuasion. As a child, Fernandes and his mother had regular flights on Malaysian airlines, which sparked his passion for airplanes. When his parents moved him to boarding school in England when he was twelve, he was exposed to a new cultural environment. He became a standout athlete there, representing England in cricket and hockey, but he defied his parents' desire to become a doctor and forged his own path instead.

Fernandes wanted to choose history, economics, and biology, but his preordained doctor's life forced him to opt for physics, chemistry and biology instead. This led to him failing physics and chemistry and later on spent a year traveling across the United States after finishing school, working in a variety of professions like hairdressing assistant and organ player at Boston Red Sox games before teaching rugby and cricket in Australia. After retaking his A-levels and working as a waiter in England, he was accepted to the London School of Economics to study accounting. For him, attending university was more than just studying; it was a chance to learn other cultures, thus joining the Brazilian and Mongolian societies in order to broaden his views.

Fernandes' early career was a numpy journey. After a stint as an auditor, which he hated, he landed a job at Virgin under Richard Branson, becoming Financial Controller for Virgin Television at 24. Upon returning to Malaysia, he then spent 12 years at Warner Music, rising to CEO of Warner Music Malaysia at 27. There, he championed local artists like Sheila Majid, Jamal and Salim, transforming the industry by prioritizing Malaysian talent over American imports. His talent for spotting opportunities and defying convention set the stage for his illustrious future career.

Fernandes' conviction in people and disruption served as the foundation for his entrepreneurship. By commercializing local music, he innovated at Warner Music and produced a roster that appealed to Malaysia's diverse populace. He had a similarly audacious plan for AirAsia. To make air travel accessible to all, when it was considered a luxury at that time. Motivated by budget airlines such as easyJet, he recognized unrealized potential in the Malaysian market. With flat hierarchies, empowered employees, and a single, eye-catching corporate identity (the red, no bird logo), his idea went beyond simply offering lower tickets. By avoiding conventional routes and promoting a meritocratic culture in which a baggage handler might become a pilot, he defied the norm.

The pivotal moment came in 2001. After leaving Warner Music amid a chaotic merger, Fernandes found himself jobless in London. While enjoying himself at a bar, he stumbled upon a TV segment on easyJet's founder, Stelios, reigniting his childhood dream of owning an airline. Fernandes soon returned to Malaysia, convinced he could make air travel accessible. With no experience, no capital, and only his music industry contacts, he took a leap, buying a failing airline, AirAsia, on September 9, 2001, just days before 9/11, an event that shook the world and turned the aviation industry into a turmoil.

The implementation process was hands-on. In order to come up with one million ringgit, Fernandes remortgaged his home with the help of music industry partners. They acquired AirAsia, two planes, 254 scared staff, and 200,000 passengers. Faced with immediate skepticism, Fernandes flattened hierarchies and promoted transparency by relying on his people-first attitude. In order to comprehend their difficulties, he worked side by side with employees, lugging bags and acting as cabin crew. As a result, sensible choices were made, such as purchasing belt loaders to make baggage handling easier. In order to maximize impact with the least amount of resources, branding was simplified to a striking red logo. Fernandes successfully navigated Malaysia's political terrain with perseverance, earning the approval of then-Prime Minister Tun Mahathir.

The expansion of AirAsia was rapid. It had grown from two aircraft in 2001 to 220, carrying 73 million passengers a year, surpassing Emirates and catching up to Singapore Airlines. By exploring uncharted routes like Bandung, Macau, and Siargao, Fernandes turned underappreciated locations into important hubs. Defying expectations for a Malaysian company, AirAsia expanded internationally, reaching Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, India, Japan, Vietnam, and China. Nine consecutive years of winning "World's Best Low-Cost Carrier" attests to the airline's innovative and inclusive culture. Fernandes embraced technology like Big Pay and Travel 360 and also championed talent development, transforming a Maybank employee into a top CEO and elevating luggage handlers to pilots. By taking chances like buying Queens Park Rangers and sponsoring Manchester United, he maintained the vibrancy of AirAsia's brand.

Fernandes' journey wasn't a walk in a park. Formula One was a financial flop, and QPR's ups and downs tested his resolve. Yet, his philosophy to dare to dream and embrace failure drove him forward. He built a family-like company with 20,000 staff, no unions, and open communication, proving that passion and people could redefine an industry. His story inspires not just entrepreneurs but anyone chasing a dream, showing that with grit and heart, even the skies are within reach.