AIR TRANSPORT IN THE CARIBBEAN AND ITS IMPACT ON TOURISM



Since its inception, the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) has played a pivotal role in facilitating the discussion of issues which have a crosscutting effect on the development and wellbeing of the Greater Caribbean region. Its four focal areas (Trade, Sustainable Tourism, Disaster Risk Reduction and Transport) are interrelated and share common points of interest such as air and maritime connectivity, which affects not only tourism but trade as well as.

In this article, we focus on air connectivity, which has a growing impact on the region's tourism, affecting in particular the SIDS (Small Island Developing States), which depend heavily on this economic activity.

For persons participating in intraregional tourism, be it foreigners or Caribbean natives, it is known that in order to arrive at nearby, or even neighbouring islands, it can take an average of 8 hours to do so. The traveller is sometimes required to stay overnight because the connections that should allow for a relatively short trip, in terms of both time and distance, simply do not exist.

In any event, all of these elements affect those tourists who, wanting to visit this region, discover that neither the schedules nor the airline options offer a dynamic alternative to optimise the duration and quality of stay. For the most part, when dealing with travellers making a transoceanic trip, once in the region, their time becomes golden in order to learn and have fun.

What this region has to offer, is affected by competition from other regions around the world, for example South East Asia, where there are adequate airline options that present a variety of prices and flight schedules as well as intraregional transport. This offer is placed on the markets of origin of its consumers like Europe for example, which quite often are also priority markets for the Caribbean.

In that respect, during the recent conference organised by the Caribbean Tourism Organisation (CTO) in Martinique on October 16-18, entitled "State of the Industry Conference", one of the issues attracting most of the attention of the participants was matters on air transport Caribbean, with the issue being addressed in two of its general sessions.

During the course of these sessions, attended by senior executives of several regional airlines, as well as representatives of the International Air Transport Association (IATA) and the Latin American Air Transport Association (ALTA), there was a clear expression of concerns and problems regarding the obstacles which thus far, have hampered the development of fluent and efficient connectivity among the islands of the region.

As indicated by the different presenters during their interventions, there are many contributing factors to the problem of connectivity that may be not only economic in nature, but also technical

and political. They range from operating costs to the cost of fuel, taxes applied to airline tickets, passenger departure taxes, lack of implementation of an “open skies” policy, among others.

An appeal was made to the Heads of State and the Tourism Ministers of the various island countries to tackle this problem through open and transparent dialogue, which would lead to the formulation of concrete action plans, resulting in a change in the current situation. As a result, the Government of Martinique offered its collaboration in supporting the carrying out of this dialogue.

Along this same vein of interest in addressing the issue and being able to arrive at conclusions that would yield possible action plans, the ACS, together with IATA, ALTA and the CTO, are extending an invitation to the authorities of the air transport and tourism sectors of the region to participate in the forum entitled “Caribbean Aviation Day”. Said forum will take place in Cancún, Mexico on November 13th of this year.

“Caribbean Aviation Day” tackles issues and challenges being faced by the region such as connectivity, as well as possible alliances that need to be developed. The objective is to improve the air transport problem in the near future, which would impact positively on the increase in the flow of visitors, both intraregional and international. The foregoing would help to promote Multidestination Tourism, producing a greater impact on the economies of the islands.

Given the nature of the “Caribbean Aviation Day” forum and those invited to attend, the expectation is to arrive at conclusions and propose actions that would guide the efforts of the actors involved (Public and Private Sectors) at all levels (technical, political and economic) and in that way, effectively launch a process of change in terms of the flow of air transport in the Greater Caribbean region.

Invitations to participate in this forum are extended to the airlines of the region, among them are Bahamas Air, Caribbean Airlines, Cayman Airways, Cubana, InselAir, Surinam Airways, Air Caraïbes. Airlines from North America, South America and Europe, such as Aeroméxico, Air Canada, Avianca, Copa, Delta, Iberia, Interjet, JetBlue, LAN, TAM, United Airlines UPS and Volaris will also be taking part.

The ACS hopes that in this vein, it would not only contribute to the resolution of connectivity issues but will also work together with international entities for the development of this sector in the region.