CARIBBEAN FBOS RESPOND TO RISING TRAFFIC

News / Business aviation

St. Maarten's Princess Juliana International Airport (SXM) has emerged as a key hub for Caribbean private aviation traffic, especially during the peak winter season. Unlike other nearby Leeward Islands–such as Anguilla, Dominica, Saba, St. Bart's, St. Eustatius and Tortola–St. Maarten's airport can accept larger aircraft and thus offers far greater operational flexibility.

SXM has one of the longest runways in the region (at 7,546 feet), not to mention 54,000 sq ft of ramp space for business jets. It can accommodate aircraft of up to the size of an A340.

The airport is served by two FBOs: Signature Flight Support and TLC Aviation. The latter is the brainchild of four partners: Steven Kong, Sheldon Palm, Clement Richardson and Earl Wyatt, who formed the company in 2003. Not only does it cater to private jet arrivals, but the company also offers yacht charters and support services through its sister company, Sea Grapes International.

"Many of our clients are coming to their yachts, so it made sense to combine the two offerings,"

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explained Palm.TLC also offers charter flights to other smaller islands in partnership with Winair and St. Bart's Commuter, generally using aircraft such as Twin Otters and Cessna Caravans that have the required short-takeoff and landing performance.

Signature Flight Support is the other major player at the airport. It, too, offers yacht connections, as well as the usual VIP and crew support services. Signature also has FBOs at V.C. Bird Antigua International Airport (ANU), R. Bradshaw International Airport in St. Kitts (RBK) and Vance W. Amory International Airport in Nevis.

The Signature facility at ANU offers business aviation operators an executive terminal, lounge, offices and two hangars. Signature's Nevis and St. Kitts bases offer passenger handling and coordination services to expedite clearance through customs and immigration to and from the destinations.

During the peak season St. Maarten sometimes has to turn away aircraft, as barely 7 percent of total apron space at the airport is devoted to general aviation. Exacerbating the issue is the fact that passengers all want to arrive at a similar time, and VIP travelers sometimes have to endure long security lines at the FBOs. Burgeoning traffic from the growing Latin American market is adding to the strain, but traffic comes in from all over the globe. Since the entire region relies heavily on tourism, this lack of space is a pressing issue.

SXM is planning to open a two-wing facility and expand its general aviation aircraft parking by next year. The new 18,300-sq-ft building will more than quadruple the size of the current facility and will be home to both TLC and Signature. More parking is likely to come from bulldozing the current employee parking lot.

ST. KITTS EXPANDS

For now, St. Maarten is in a relatively strong position. In 2014 corporate aircraft movements reached 9,364 and overall general aviation constitutes 15.5 percent of aircraft movements at the airport, second in the region only to the Bahamas. However, snapping closely at its heels is St. Kitts, which has an 8,002-foot runway and a brand-new FBO, the Yu Lounge.

The new private terminal is a joint venture between the government of St. Kitts, the St. Christopher Air and Sea Ports Authority and the Veling Group. Designed by Indian architects Bobby Mukherji and Associates, the modern facility is located next to the existing main terminal building. There's an on-site chef, meeting room, complimentary Wi-Fi, device-charging facilities and gourmet catering services. There is also a crew lounge.

In 2014 U.S.-based World Fuel Services added Yu to its growing Air Elite Network of 45 FBOs. To bolster its revenues the facility also offers lounge services to passengers flying on Delta for an extra $300 on top of their airfare. On arrival, they are whisked away from the long queues at the rudimentary main terminal and escorted to the lounge in a limousine. While they relax, the staff takes care of baggage handling, immigration and customs formalities.

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St. Kitts is banking heavily on marketing its citizenship-through-investment program to cultivate high-end tourism. Interested parties can become nationals if they pass the government's strict background checks and finance an approved real estate development, including the fledgling new $100 million marina at Christophe Harbor, which offers 24 new berths that can accommodate yachts up to 300 feet. Once completed, the luxury development will include a shore-side village and hotels. The new site will establish St. Kitts as a major superyacht port on the Caribbean cruising circuit with Antigua, St. Maarten and St. Bart's.

There is a great deal of work yet to do to make this happen, and if it comes off, it would improve tourism for all the Leeward Islands, especially during peak season. One thing is for certain: cooperation between St. Maarten and St. Kitts would soothe some of the real headache caused by landing at SXM during the Christmas and New Year holiday period.

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