

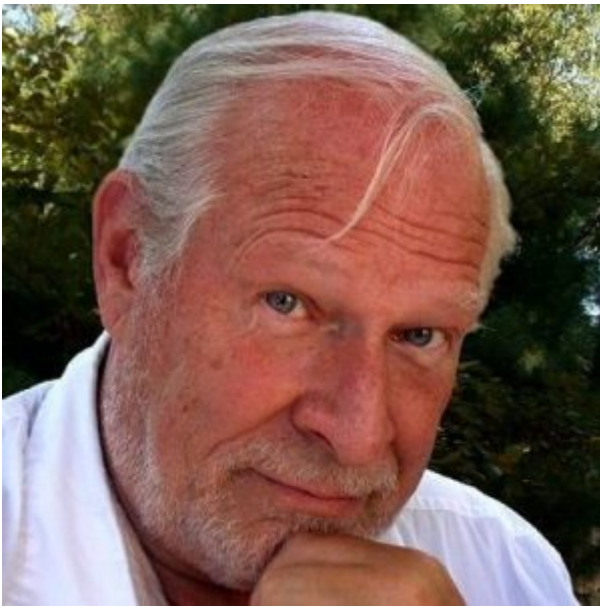


THE BIG TO-DO ABOUT FAILING CARIBBEAN AIRLIFT

News / Airlines



by Cdr. Bud Slabbaert



In past three weeks, politicians and industry leaders at a number of summits in the Caribbean have expressed the urgent need for better air connections and more reasonable prices. Sorry folks. That's an old hat to say the least. There may even be a skeleton in the closet.

In 2007, Ministers of Civil Aviation in the Caribbean and other tourism and travel officials drafted the 'San Juan Accord', which called for regional officials to put in place the policy framework that would make intra-Caribbean travel for airlines less expensive and more competitive in terms of attracting investment.

In 2012, at the annual Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Investment Conference, industry experts made it clear that the lack of airlift within the region represents a missed opportunity for Caribbean tourism,

"There is no Caribbean government anywhere that can ignore the difficulties that face airlift in the region," said the then Minister of Tourism of St. Kitts. "What we are saying at the CTO (ed. Caribbean Tourism Organisation) is that all Caribbean governments need to create a forum that can really bring these issues to the table. It is my hope that over the next few months there will be certain opportunities that will be used."

What was suggested in 2012 as hope for action 'in the next few months' takes six years and shows no results. The Director General and CEO of the Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association (CHTA) at the time commented: "The problem is, we have not implemented what we ourselves agree needs to be done." In other words, let's just call it a lot of 'um diddle diddle um diddle ay' and no action.

As for industry organizations in 2018 warning for the impact of raising passenger taxes? At that same 2012 Conference, the then President of the CHTA said that he noticed new policies for taxing not only the private sector, but also our visitors directly, and that these masquerade under such names as airport improvement taxes, tourism enhancement fees, and airline passenger duty. He believed that increased taxation is regressive, resulting in less revenue for the hotel and

attraction sector. He urged governments to make a “serious effort” to review their taxation policies on the tourism industry and said: “It is now time to remove or reduce all excessive consumption taxes. Our industry is based on competitive pricing. Our visitors will simply choose other destinations.”

The alarm clock rang already in 2012, but apparently someone hit the ‘snooze button’. Snoozing before officially getting out of bed is a pretty standard practice. To give some background on the biology of sleep. About an hour before eyes actually open, the body begins to ‘reboot.’ The brain sends out signals to release hormones, the body temperature rises, and one enters into a lighter sleep in preparation for the wake-up. So, the current big ‘To-Do’ about passenger taxes may very well be considered no more than ‘the preparation for a wake-up’. Yet, snoozing six years could also be considered a coma and one may question whether there will be an actual rise-and-shine to remove or reduce taxes. After all, any Government will be very hesitant to give up a cash-cow.

At an industry conference in 2017, the tourism expert consultant and former Minister of Tourism and Aviation of the Bahamas, Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace called the implementation of the taxation ‘committing economic suicide without doing it’.

In July 2018, the Prime Minister of Barbados, reminded the attending Honourables at yet another summit that “The single domestic space for hassle intra-regional travel must be a place where we must start if we are serious about the single market and the single economy. It must be the place if we want the buy-in of our citizens.” She stated that a single domestic space for hassle free travel pre-supposes a single domestic space for transportation and that the Region could do better with respect to moving people between island to island and country to country.

In 2015, the Secretary General of the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) has urged regional authorities to institute an Open Skies policy. It would allow regional carriers to take unlimited flights to all CARICOM member states and encourage the growth of competition among carriers, elimination of secondary screening would encourage greater demand for intra-regional travel. He spoke at the airline route development forum, “World Routes” in Durban, South Africa.

Already in 2006 a study was done for the same CTO, called ‘Caribbean Air Transport Study’ as part of the Caribbean Regional Sustainable Tourism Development Program. The main objective of the study was to ‘assist the region in rationalizing international and intra-regional air transport as a means of ensuring the sustainable development of the tourism sector’, or ‘how to develop and maintain regional airlift capacity consistent with the sustainable development of the tourism sector’. The study called for ‘Open Skies’ between the various countries in the region. Most of the governments signed bilateral agreements with the USA because they want US airlines and passengers to come and visit. But ‘Open Skies’ among the Caribbean territories themselves? Fifteen years of ZZZzzzz and snoring!

Recently in 2018 at an industry conference, the before mentioned Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace stated that the Caribbean itself is the major market for Caribbean airlift.

The Caribbean may not need any more studies and committees, and meetings of Honourables, calling upon others to do something where they failed themselves to take the initiative for action. A ‘Summit-and-Do’ should be organized, whereby is nailed who will take the first step, what will be done, and a date of completion is set. Wouldn’t that be an honourable initiative for Honourables to agree on and stick to? In the meantime, on and on it goes and where it ends no one knows.



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