AIR CANADA SEEKS TO TURN TORONTO INTO PREMIER INTERNATIONAL HUB

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Air Canada plans to aggressively market Toronto Pearson International Airport as “North America’s first global transit hub.”

Speaking at the Boyd Group International Aviation Forecast Summit in Las Vegas, Air Canada president-passenger airlines Ben Smith said the airline has failed to properly leverage Toronto’s location on the world map in the past, but plans to rectify that mistake going forward. The Canadian carrier, which has been pursuing a strategy of building a robust international network, wants to use its growing fleet of Boeing 787s to connect passengers to points all over the globe via Toronto. Air Canada has nine 787-8s and two 787-9s in its fleet, with 27 more 787-9s on order for delivery through 2019.

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While US airlines have developed a number of major hubs, Smith said the big US airports handle such a large amount of domestic traffic that they are not global transit hubs in the mold of Amsterdam Schiphol and London Heathrow airports in Europe. “We don’t see a true global hub in North America,” Smith said. “There are many great examples in Europe.” He said “all the necessary ingredients” are in place to turn Toronto Pearson into a leading international transit hub.

Air Canada is “seeing a massive increase in passengers connecting over Toronto,” Smith added. He said the airline is seeking to “dramatically increase” the number of US passengers it flies to international destinations via Toronto, from which US passengers can pre-clear US customs before boarding a connecting flight back to the US.

While Toronto will be Air Canada’s main international hub, it plans to use Vancouver International Airport as a supplementary transit point for transpacific passengers and Montreal Trudeau International Airport to serve destinations in France and the French Caribbean. Key to Montreal-based Air Canada’s international plans is gaining regulatory approval for a transpacific joint venture (JV) with Beijing-based Air China, which would give it a JV with Star Alliance partners over both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The airline operates a transatlantic JV with Star partners Lufthansa and United Airlines.

“With Air China—with the position of Toronto and Vancouver in North America—we think we’ll able to do on transpacific what we did across the Atlantic” with United and Lufthansa, Smith said.

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