

THE LONDON GATWICK RENAISSANCE

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Two decades ago, if you had told a passenger – or even the management – of London Gatwick Airport that it would be operating direct flights to points as distant as Lima, Peru; Hanoi, Vietnam; Tianjin, China; or Cape Town, South Africa, they would probably have laughed.

Despite the growth of long-haul specialist Virgin Atlantic, with its services to Lagos and Las Vegas; and British Airways' cluster of routes to the Caribbean, Gatwick, located some 27 miles south of central London, remained in most people's minds a 'bucket-and-spade airport', largely handling charter flights to the Mediterranean for summer holidays.

There had been previous exceptions: As far back as the late 1950s, a cluster of US supplemental carriers – long-gone names such as Overseas National Airways, Capitol International and Transocean Airlines – had operated into the airport. In the 1970s maverick Sir Freddie Laker introduced his groundbreaking, low-cost Skytrain to the US from 1977-82, while British Caledonian operated to South America, West Africa and the US from Gatwick in the 1970s and 80s.

And, with the 1977 Bermuda II agreement limiting the US airlines that could serve Heathrow to Pan Am and Trans World Airways (later replaced by United Airlines and American Airlines when Pan Am and TWA went bust), Delta and Braniff aircraft could be found on the Gatwick ramp.

But the vast bulk of Gatwick services were still European.

In recent years, however, there has been a rapid increase in the number of long-haul destinations served from Gatwick. The percentage of long-haul services at the airport has remained steady at around 15% over recent years, but only because short-haul services have also grown strongly.

That static percentage belies the fact that in 2016 alone, 20 new long-haul routes were

inaugurated, taking the total to more than 50: “Broadly, we’re flying well over 1.2 million more passengers long-haul in 2016 compared to 2102,” a Gatwick spokesman told *Airways*.

Demand from foreign tourists wanting to visit the UK’s capital was a major driver in the increasing number of long-haul routes, he said. However, the airport’s £1.3 billion (\$1.6 billion) in infrastructure investment since it was bought by US-based Global Infrastructure Partners in 2009 had also made Gatwick a more attractive offer for long-haul airlines, “particularly low-cost carriers such as Norwegian and WestJet”.

That long-haul, low-cost model – WestJet operates to half-a-dozen Canadian cities, while Norwegian has a rapidly-expanding portfolio of services in the US and Caribbean – is, according to Gatwick, aided by its lower cost base compared to London Heathrow.

Apart from lower costs, new facilities at Gatwick have included two new piers and a new baggage system, while the next five years are due to see a further £1.2 billion of investments including the expansion of the departure lounges at both its terminals and the major refurbishment of the integral railway station that provides a direct connection to central London.

The airport has also vowed to continue fighting to be the site for a new London runway; the decision has been made to hand this to Heathrow, but Gatwick, currently the world’s busiest single-runway airport with an estimated 43.5 million passengers in 2016, has refused to give up.

Certainly, it has more free land on which to build that runway (if Heathrow’s new runway goes ahead it will involve razing the village of Sipson, which lies just outside Heathrow’s northern boundary).

However, given the cramped environs of southeast England, even the Gatwick runway would require the diversion of both a major and a river. And the towns and villages in the West Sussex countryside around Gatwick are home to many well-heeled residents who are guaranteed to put up a legal fight against the prospect of more aircraft taking off and landing over their expensive homes.

Norwegian’s growing fleet of Boeing 787-8s has seen a steady increase in the number of its long-haul flights out of Gatwick – up by some 50%, to 30-plus weekly in 2016 compared to 2015 – with a further sharp ramp-up expected from April 2017 in services to Los Angeles, Oakland, Orlando and Fort Lauderdale. Together with a short-haul fleet of Boeing 737-800s, Norwegian is now Gatwick’s third-largest operator.

Among the carriers to have joined Norwegian in offering long-haul services, Canada’s WestJet began operations in May 2016 with Boeing 767-300s and 737NGs. Ironically, no US carriers currently operate scheduled Gatwick-US routes, although British Airways now has a regular service to New York JFK.

Several airlines that have chosen Gatwick in the past have been blunt in saying they only opted for it because it was impossible to get into slot-constrained Heathrow. However, WestJet spokeswoman Lauren Stewart told *Airways* that “Gatwick was our target from the beginning because of its connectivity out of London: Some 45 airlines operate from Gatwick, offering WestJet guests low fares and easy connections to and from approximately 200 destinations in 90 countries; more destinations than from any other airport in the UK.

“WestJet was extremely pleased with the response that we had to our new service. Our flights generated significant capacity and higher-than-average load factors.”

Air Canada’s general manager sales for UK and Ireland Stephen Gerrard said that its low-cost subsidiary, Air Canada Rouge, was sufficiently pleased with its first season flying into Gatwick from its Toronto hub that it planned to add services from Vancouver to its summer 2017 schedules.

Gatwick’s unused capacity and improving reputation mean that the two Canadian carriers are unlikely to be the last to add Gatwick to their route maps.

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