VIRGIN AUSTRALIA TO START CHRISTCHURCH-RAROTONGA FLIGHTS

News / Airports / Routes

Virgin Australia is making a smart utilisation play with a new back-of-the-clock winter weekend flight between **Christchurch** on New Zealand's South Island and **Rarotonga** in the Cook Islands beginning in seven months' time. Tickets are now on sale with an introductory lead-in fare of NZ$299.

The airline will fly the roundtrip service once weekly between June 25 and October 8 2016 using two-class Boeing 737-800 aircraft. "Our flights between Christchurch and Rarotonga will feature our award-winning Business Class, with luxury leather seating and menus designed by our resident head chef Luke Mangan," noted Virgin Australia chief commercial officer Judith Crompton in a statement.

"With up to five flights each week already operating between Auckland and Rarotonga, this new service from Christchurch ensures more New Zealanders can conveniently explore this beautiful part of the world," Crompton continued.

Operationally, partner Air New Zealand has a significant presence in the Cook Islands, which are "in free association" with New Zealand for their international relations, and a significant winter tourism destination. Air New Zealand operates flights to Rarotonga from Los Angeles, Auckland and Sydney, and has previously flown from Christchurch on a seasonal basis. Clearly, there would be an opportunity for through flights from Christchurch to Los Angeles if the Kiwi carrier and its partner Virgin Australia were permitted to cooperate.

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Australian Aviation quizzed Air New Zealand about whether these Christchurch services will be operated in conjunction with Virgin Australia's service, or whether the airline was ceding the route to its trans-Tasman partner, in which Air NZ has a significant shareholding but where there are constraints on the extent to which the airlines are entitled to cooperate in the provision of Pacific Island services.

"Air New Zealand competes with Virgin Australia and many other operators on Pacific Island routes and will continue to do so," an airline spokesperson confirmed. "Air New Zealand offers direct services between Auckland and Rarotonga, which customers connect to via our 22 domestic ports."

The spokesperson also confirmed that there would not be any form of cooperation in terms of through-ticketing or interlining from CHC-RAR on Virgin Australia and then RAR-LAX on Air New Zealand, nor that Air New Zealand intends to approach the relevant competition regulators to enable any such cooperation, stating, "We have no plans to do so."

Virgin Australia highlighted its close working with the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation and Christchurch Airport in developing the flight. "Virgin Australia is offering convenient services to a destination which is much-requested and much-missed by South Islanders," said Christchurch Airport's chief commercial officer – aeronautical, Justin Watson, in Virgin Australia's release.

"There hasn't been a non-stop service from Christchurch to Rarotonga for many years and we have travellers and travel agents constantly asking when there will be one," Cook Islands Tourism Corporation general manager Graeme West said. "We are delighted that Virgin Australia has seized the opportunity. It's a short non-stop flight to paradise."

Passenger education may well be required in terms of the logistics of booking accommodation given that the flight crosses the International Date Line and goes back in time. (What a pity for marketers that the route starts in 2016 and will thus miss the 2015 tie-in to the movie *Back to the Future.*) The outbound flight will depart Christchurch at 1400 on a Saturday, crossing the date line and arriving the day before on Friday at 2035. The return flight departs Rarotonga at 2310 and arrives in Christchurch at 0225 on Sunday.

CHC and RAR are 2211nm (4,095 km) apart, approximately 700nm (1,300 km) longer than Sydney flights from Christchurch.

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