



CARIBBEAN AIRLIFT: PRIORITIES, DEVELOPMENT AND REQUIREMENTS - SHERKANE DE HAENEN FROM BIRDY

News / Business aviation



I'm fortunate to have a lot of contacts in the aviation industry. I'll admit that I've met a few of them whose stories intrigue me and make me want to learn more about how they got started in the business. Their vision of development, needs and obstacles. Today I'd like to talk about a feminine touch in Caribbean business aviation. I present a discussion with Sherkane De Haenen from Birdy.aero

T.O. An obvious question, how you ended up in aviation?

S.D.H. The thing is, I was raised in St. Barth, an island in the Caribbean, as you may know. And if you've ever been there or ever landed there on the plane, you must be aware that aviation is a thing in St. Barth. The Runway is one of the shortest in the world.

T.O. Still on Top 10 list of most dangerous airports...

S.D.H. I think that that rating is not fair because there's actually no statistics with accidents. So

even though it could be considered as dangerous, it's not really because the pilots are trained for it. So, we have no issue with that. But, yes, it's a very special airport with special landing. And every landing is a show. Like all the people who go in St. Barth go watch landings at the airport. So, since I was very, very young, it was a thing for me, and especially also because my grandfather was the first pilot to land in St. Barth. So, I guess it's been in my blood forever.

T.O. So it was, your choice, or let's say, it was a family must be in aviation?

S.D.H. Well, not really, because not all of us are in aviation, but all of us are fascinated and passionate about aviation, that's for sure.

T.O. Was it easy to be in aviation? We're talking a lot about the fact we need more of female touch. We need more women in aviation in very different roles and so on. But, uh, if I look, we still have 10% to 15% now. So, was it easy for you to be a woman in aviation?

S.D.H. Well, it's not easy to be a woman, first of all. But it wasn't hard for me to be in aviation as it wasn't hard for me to be in the automotive industry before. Just because I think when you want to do something, when you show interest, when you show motivation, and when you have a strong, personality, it totally helps to get whatever job you want. After that, you have to prove that. I mean, whether you're a man or a woman, it's the same story, but especially as a woman, you have to prove that you're worth it. I guess I succeeded.

T.O. Definitely. Why and how? I'm asking because I see that a lot of girls are hesitating and they're not so confident that they will succeed. As you told, you must know exactly what you want. You must persist, and then you just have to go. And don't ask a permission to be in industry.

S.D.H. Yeah, that's what I mean, with strong personality. The thing is, I like to say fake it until you make it. Just do it, and then you'll see what happens. But just there, they're doing it.

T.O. You are based in a wonderful place. I visited once. Even if I'm still scary to land at St. Barth., it's a kind of legend. A lot of people are talking about St. Barth. without even knowing the real situation and the real life. If we talk about aviation, St. Barth. what are specifics, trends? What are needs for aviation at St. Barth. and Caribbeans in general how you see the development from your perspective?

S.D.H. Well, it's a very tough question, and there would be so much to say. We wouldn't have time in just an interview. I mean, there's St. Barth and there's the region. First of all, St. Barth is well developed. I think we reached the maximum of airplane movements that we can handle. So, it wouldn't be about doing more, but maybe about doing better. And I know that stakeholders here are working on it every single day of the year, so I'm not worried about it. Regarding the rest of the Caribbean, it's a whole different story. I think they're on the right track, but there's still so much to do.

One of the main issues in Caribbean aviation is that every island is dealing with airlifts its own way. So, it makes it kind of complex to go from an island to another and for Caribbean visitors to enjoy the whole Caribbean. So that's one of the main subjects that is in discussion within the stakeholders here in the Caribbean. I think that this is the main kind of issue. It's difficult to talk about the Caribbean as a whole because, as I said, every island is different. But if I could take one example, I would take St. Maartin, because there's a lot of traffic, of air traffic within the high season.

The problem it's too much to handle for only one airport. Should I be a magician, I would develop the other airport of St. Martin, the one on the French side. And if I could, I would make it a business airport like Le Bourget in Paris. I think that would make things a lot smoother and the service a lot better, especially for private jets because I mean, that's what I'm spending specialized in.

T.O. We were talking about that I guess 3 years back during Caribavia event. And there was a project of Grand Casa airport development. But I'm not sure what is the stage of development of this project. And I've seen both airports and I think that as you told, uh, having the second one, uh, probably dedicated to private aviation would really help to take a lot of traffic or a lot of handling off from San Juliana.

S.D.H. It would take at least 3000 movements off St. Juliana airport just in one season.

T.O. You told that Caribbean it's difficult. If we talk about business aviation, do you think it's complicated for operators to deal with every single island, having rules and regulations and so of. Would it be easier to reach out to you, as local company, who can handle it and all the specific things to each island?

S.D.H. Well, I mean, I'm no one to give one magic solution. What is true is that it's limiting. I mean, it's not making it especially difficult because, I mean, operators know how to do their work and they do it every day, so they know what to expect if they want to go to one or another island. But it does limit things and trips and possibilities for visitors. I think it's more complicated for visitors to have the freedom they expect in traveling within the Caribbean. I think the solution would be to talk about it with all the stakeholders, especially every local government and just make the air traffic rules a little bit smoother. Make the life of visitors a little bit easier.

T.O. Usually, things like that are discussed during aviation events. We have EBACE for Europe, NBAA-BACE for United States, MEBA Show for Middle East, all welcoming the rest of the world. What about Caribbean? Because last year we've missed usual Caribavia. So far, I have no information if it's going to happen. Do you need an event uniting all the Caribbean governments sitting around one table taking decisions?

S.D.H. In a perfect world, that would be great. The thing is, Caribbean is a very special area, as you know, which doesn't make everything possible immediately. I think it's easier to organize this type of event in Europe, than it is in the Caribbean, because of the airlift, but not only. I don't think we need the same type of events like EBACE or MEBA Show. I've been there, and I like to go there because I'm an aviation enthusiast. I go there for networking. I don't really go there because I expect them to sit at a table and make decisions. I think they're discussing a lot of things, but they don't have the same issues that we have. So, it can be the same type of event. And luckily, we have someone called Commander Bud who created an event like that for the Caribbean. It's called Caribavia. It should be happening every year. It should be happening in St. Barts next year. I picture this type of event considering the location. I picture it more as a retreat, like a corporate retreat gathering the utmost figures of the aviation industry. And that would be a great opportunity to discuss local matters, to network, to give life to projects that could fit the region. Maybe eVTOL projects, to modernize and create opportunities for growth within the Caribbean.

T.O. I was thinking about would eVTOLs be a good fit to solve issues you have with the connectivity? Would it be a perfect fit of for the region? Because a lot of companies would love to come and try and test and maybe, uh, participate in the development.

S.D.H. That would be a very good idea. I think we have that on next year's Caribavia schedule. This discussion should be on the table. I think that would be a great opportunity for visitors and for companies and for every island. So, let's discuss it and do something.

T.O. As I understand, I will have to torture Commander Bud, because I have no details about next year, Caribavia. I had the pleasure to live Caribavia event twice, both at St. Maartin, amazing one, not sit and listen but very proactive one. So, knowing him, I can just imagine some, uh, big surprises coming.

S.D.H. I don't have your experience with Caribavia, but for sure it's a different event. It has nothing to do with standard conference type of events. I think it will be gathering ideas and making things happened. That's what we want in the Caribbean. If you want to know more, you can go on Caribavia website. There's already a few subjects that are planned and available to.

T.O. I will spread the message. My last question - what do you want for you and your company in five years?

S.D.H. I'm not going to be so original. What I wish everyone, every business, everyone as a single individual. I hope for success, of course. What makes me happy at the end of the day - is making people fly. So, I just wish that I could make a lot of people fly. It's not just about money. It's about being happy at the end of the day. I want to make a lot of people fly; I want it to go smooth. I want people to be happy about their trip. I love working within the Caribbean. We work all around the world. We make flights happen in Europe, in the US, and other parts of the world. But I, of course, I am especially attached to the Caribbean. If within five years stakeholders in the Caribbean would make things better and easier for the airlift. I wish I could make more flights happen in the Caribbean. And I would love to offer my clients, like island hopping. A nice one, not island hopping with a lot of restrictions and paperwork and delays. I really would love this level of service on every island to be flat, to be similar from an island to another. Our clients have high levels of expectations. So, I don't want them to be disappointed just because one island hasn't learned enough from tourism professionals. And if all new technology comes to Caribbean, we will need much more training. That's what we want. That's what makes people live here and earn money. Employment through tourism is, is key. If we can create more, more jobs, that would be great.

T.O. Perfect. Thank you very much! I hope to be able to join next Caribavia and see how it will be.

S.D.H. It will be the first time in St. Barth. It will also be a special edition, considering the size of St. Barth. It will be exclusive and different from the past editions. I'm looking forward to seeing you St. Barth!



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