THE CARIBBEAN: AVIATION DREAM OR NIGHTMARE?

News / Business aviation

While it is many people's **dream** holiday destination, the **Caribbean** region is viewed as a difficult challenge by many private aviation companies. Some charter brokers have even opted out of arranging flights there altogether. At PrivateFly we have chosen our Caribbean partners carefully to maximize customer service but this has been a challenging task. Private aviation in the Caribbean is certainly a very different market to Europe or the U.S.

So what's the problem? Well there's a feeling that aircraft operators in the region can be slow to respond and have a more relaxed culture compared to our high tempo working environment; flights can be prone to problems due to older aircraft or difficult weather; airports & their runways are challenging; it's highly seasonal; and permits can be complex to arrange.

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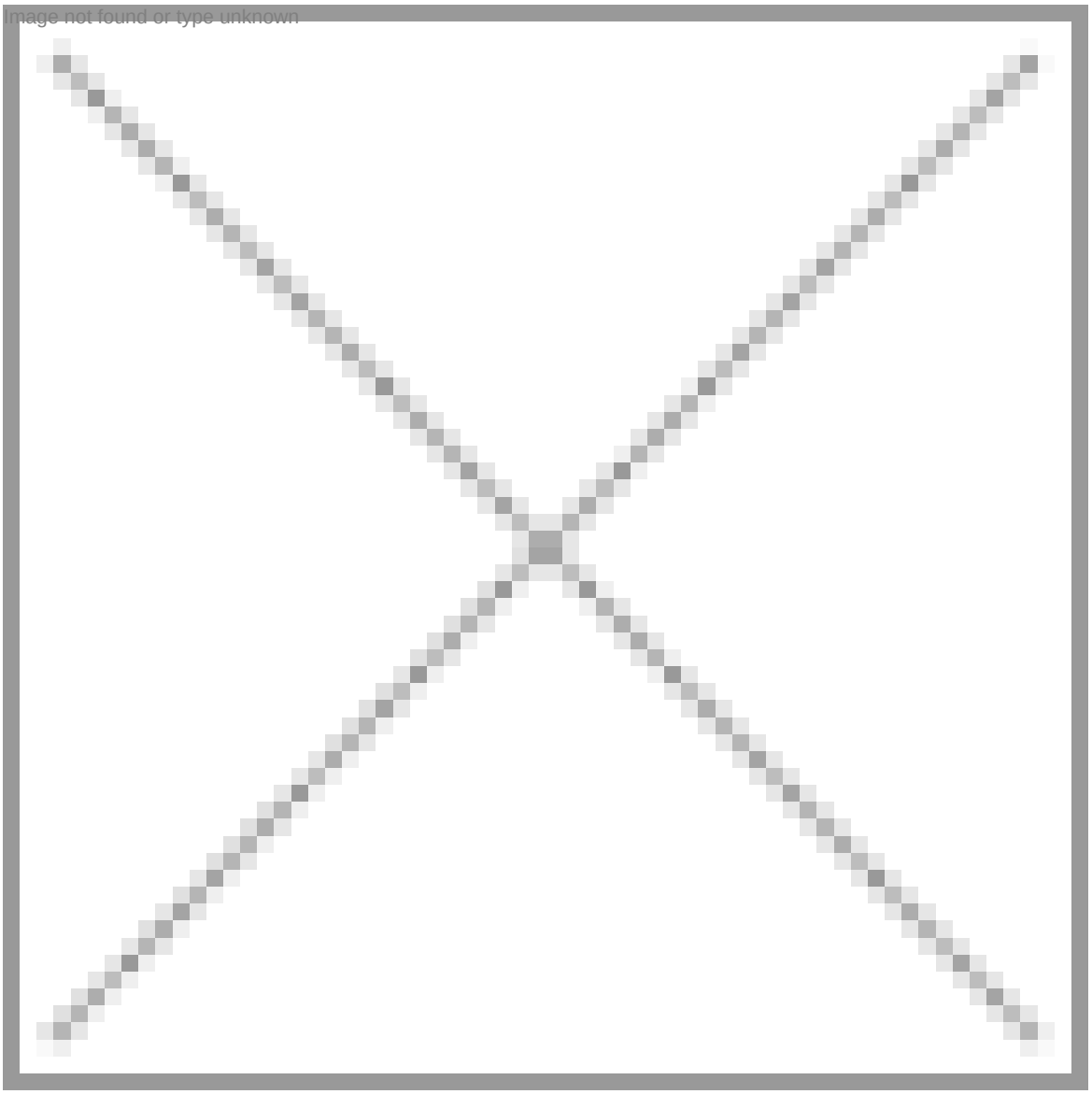

So with the next peak season approaching, I was looking forward to seeing some of the airports and operators up close for myself, when I recently visited St Maarten's Princess Juliana International Airport in August. The airport is widely known, of course, as its IATA code SXM - shorthand for the island itself, not just the airport. An indication of how important aviation and the airport are to this island community.

SXM's hub airport handles incoming international flights from the U.S., Europe and worldwide (which famously skim low over Maho beach on approach), with many passengers connecting to other islands via regional airlines or private charters. The neighboring airports of Anguilla, St Barts, Saba, St Eustatius and Grand Case all depend on SXM as their mothership.

In addition to seeing some of the impressive recent developments at SXM itself, I was able to experience flights into St Barts and Saba. These are both landings that require a high degree of skill and advanced training for pilots, due to short and difficult landings (Saba has the shortest commercial runway in the world). It was fascinating to speak to the chief training pilots at both the local airlines, Winair & St Barth Commuter, about safety and operational training for their crews.

Despite the huge operational challenges of the airports they serve, Winair has an impeccable safety record which is combined with a relaxed front-of-house charm and ease. The Winair pilots

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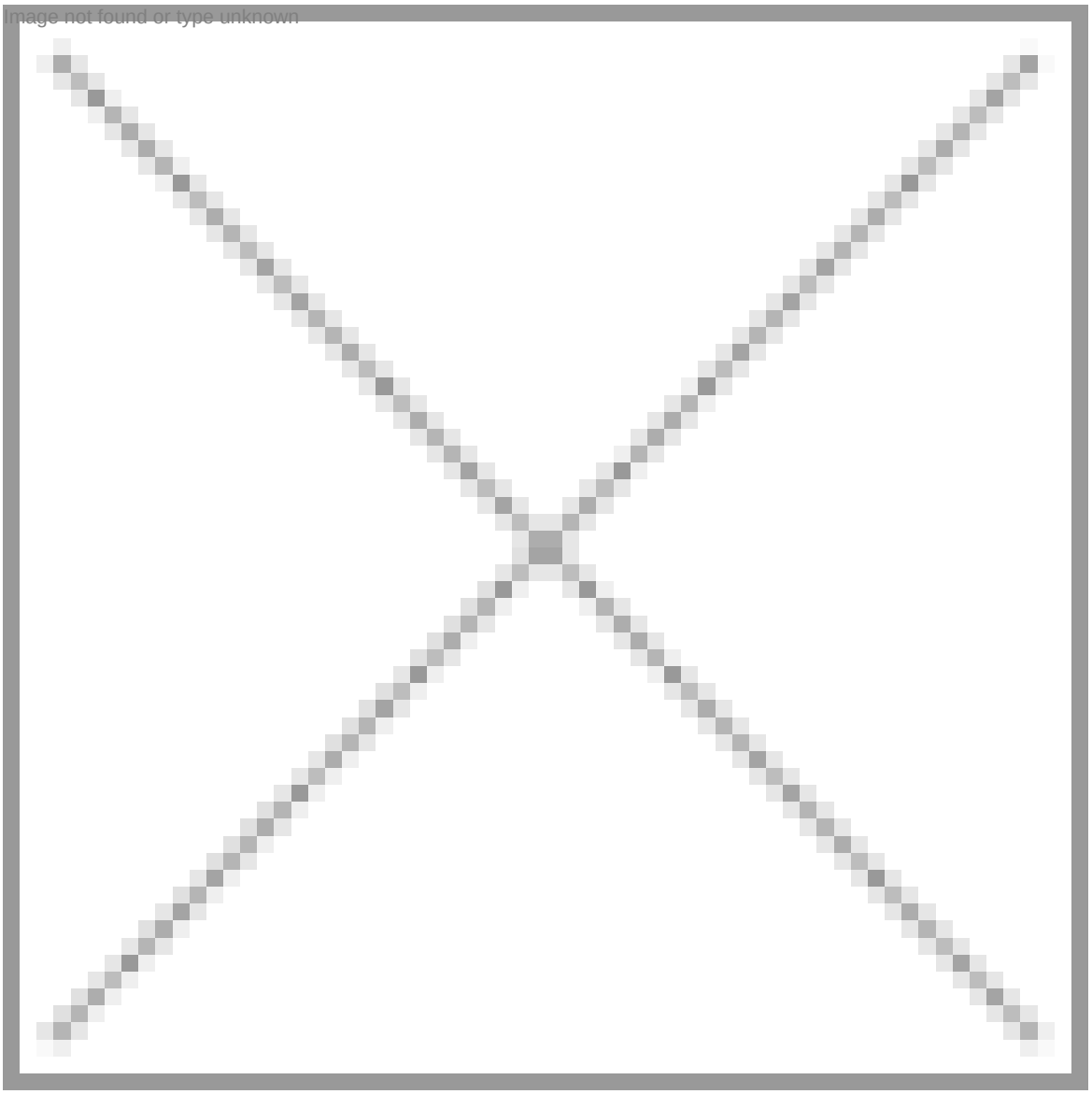
are extremely professional in the cockpit but very hands-on in terms of customer facing duties. Their Twin Otter First Officers take on many roles that their larger airline colleagues miss out on; such as greeting the passengers at the aircraft steps and giving safety briefings in the cabin. It reminded me of a private jet service in many ways, or perhaps the heyday glamor of airline travel.

As one of my fellow visitors commented after the flight deck briefing before takeoff; “That was the most clear and concise briefing I’ve ever heard.” And this was a frequent flyer.

I had the same confident feeling from French operator St Barth Commuter, who operate the single engine Grand Caravan on both scheduled and private charter flights. The status of the pilot is very high here, so their pride in turn instills confidence in the passengers. They know what they are doing, but there is certainly no complacency about safety.



Twidell with a St Barth Commuter pilot.

Aviation is a vital contributor to the local economy, with SXM airport the island’s single biggest employer. So locals are incredibly passionate and positive about it - there are no noise complaints!

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On SXM you're never more than two people away from someone who works in aviation in some capacity. Get in a taxi and the drivers will have in depth knowledge of aircraft routings and talk with pride about the airport and aviation. One told me "there are no bad pilots here."

Aviation is intertwined with life (and politics) at the deepest level. The Prime Minister of St Maarten Marcel Gumbs, used to be an Air Traffic Controller. The president of St Barts, Bruno Magras is a former pilot and CEO of St Barth Commuter.

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