

UK Flights “have come very close to breaking even”

says Civil Aviation Manager

By Mike Olsson

We have now seen UK direct flights every six weeks for over a year. It has been costly and only given a very limited access to the outside world but the flights have been much appreciated during these times of the Covid – 19 pandemic. Without the flights the Island would have been completely isolated with only the ship bringing cargo and a few passengers.

With very strict entry restriction on the earlier flights the main income for the Boeing 757 flights from Titan Airways must have been incoming airfreight and the rest of the cost for the flight born by the British tax-payer.

Now, with a vast majority of our population vaccinated and quarantine restrictions slightly more manageable (see page 8 for the latest Covid update) we are seeing increases in passenger numbers and therefore higher incomes for the flight. Even since the planning stage of the airport the dream for the vast majority of Saints has been to have direct flights to UK available. In some ways, the Covid-19 pandemic has given us a test period of UK flights, at a massive cost for the UK Government coffers.

This month's flight looks like being the financially most 'successful so far, with a considerable number of passengers arriving together will full load of freight. The return flight to Stanstead appears to have 138 passengers booked, a maximum considering our short runway which gives weight restrictions both for landing and take-off.

We therefore took the opportunity to contact the St Helena Civil Aviation Manager, Mark Souter, about the financial situation with the improved load of the UK flight and the possibility of actually making a UK flight from St Helena viable.

Mark said that *“Over the course of the last few flights, they have come very close to breaking even as we have been carrying more passengers. This is in part linked to us being able to promote the flights at an earlier stage, for example we confirmed the August flight at the end of April.”*

We asked for how long we can continue with the Titan Airlines direct flights to UK Mark explained *“We can't continue with direct flights from the UK indefinitely. Studies undertaken, not just by SHG but by external consultants, over the years (including as recently as May 2020) all reach the same conclusion – that the best 'value for money' option, for both SHG and a lower ticket price for the travellers, is having flights that route via South Africa – either Johannesburg or Cape Town. JNB and CPT are large hubs with plenty of onward airline choice (particularly at OR Tambo). Having flights routing through South Africa also means we can pick up those travellers who may wish to undertake a 'two-centre holiday' e.g. first a Safari in Africa and then travelling onward to St Helena. We would lose this business if we only had a direct UK flight.”*

He also said that *“We are looking at a small increase in frequency, particularly around the peak period and especially around Christmas time but we need to balance this with cost*



and expected demand for tickets.”

As we know that for most Saints and British travellers a direct flight from UK is the preferred option for travelling to St Helena we asked if it was possible to continue the direct service in the future. The answer was that *“We have looked at this a number of times – all of these studies were undertaken both by SHG and external aviation consultants during the pre-pandemic period when tourism was still buoyant – and even in these conditions we did not believe there would be sufficient demand to operate direct flights together with flights to South Africa. Per answer above, the best value for money solution is the South Africa option which keeps costs down for both SHG and the passengers and allows us to tap into the South African market and also others where travellers may have come to South Africa from other regions like the Middle East or Asia. The Titan B757 is a large, expensive aircraft whereas the Airlink Embraer regional jets are smaller, cheaper to operate and offer seat capacity that is much better suited to our market i.e. easier to add extra flights with a smaller less expensive regional jet than with the Boeing 757 that most major airlines have now retired because of its high fuel burn per mile flown.”*

It is true that the Boeing 757 is big and expensive to fly, especially as we cannot use it full capacity due to our short runway but using an Airbus A319 would be cheaper both to lease and fly and its practical capacity would be at least the same as the big Boeing 757.

The problem with this is that there are quite few A319's with ETOPS certification which allows it to fly long distances over water.

Even if direct flights to UK with an Airbus could be profitable on paper, St Helena has one problem we cannot do much about – the weather. A leased airplane has to be paid even if weather delays the flight for several days which happened to the recent Titan Airways flight. No private enterprise would be able to take that risk and it is also a deterrent to passengers, especially our winter time.

The very popular direct flights will be expensive for the traveller and would need some form of government guarantee to be feasible. As it looks, UK Government would not be prepared to make such an undertaking.