



PICTURE: Shutterstock/Chris Harvey

Island-hopping

Airlines reorganised direct and dual-stop routes to the Caribbean in the pandemic, writes **Alice Barnes-Brown**. So how's the future looking?

Caribbean flights that stop at multiple islands are nothing new – in fact, they're quite an old concept. In the 1950s and 1960s, when planes needed to refuel more often, most Caribbean flights used to stop at Bermuda or the Bahamas before reaching key spots such as Jamaica or Barbados.

Modern aircraft might have the capability to fly directly to any Caribbean paradise on the map, but airlines don't always have the capacity. During the pandemic and its aftermath, non-stop routes from the UK to islands such as Tobago and Cuba were subject to reorganisations that made them the secondary stop on an indirect service – or sometimes, no service at all.

Despite rising fares and limited availability, the region remains hugely popular with UK travellers: according to the Caribbean Tourism Organisation, UK visitors hit 81% of their 2019 levels in 2022, and this year, destinations such as Jamaica are continuing to surpass post-pandemic tourism predictions – with the island welcoming almost four million travellers by December.

NEW ROUTES


Earlier this year, British Airways upgraded its route to Trinidad to a direct, non-stop service in March 2023 (it previously went via Saint Lucia) and added its first ever route to Aruba via Antigua. Virgin has a host of exciting launches coming up: an all-new non-stop

service to Turks and Caicos takes off on November 15; a direct non-stop service to Antigua (which previously dropped passengers off in Barbados first) is resuming on November 21; and a non-stop winter service to Saint Lucia is starting on December 4. On December 8, the frequency of Virgin's twin-stop trips to Grenada via Barbados increases to three times per week.

GETTING INTO DOUBLES

Sensing an opportunity to sell a different sort of holiday, last summer Virgin put the connecting flights between Barbados and Grenada plus Saint Vincent and the Grenadines on sale separately – a unique move that could open a world of possibilities for twin-centre holidays. If your clients want to shimmy to Barbadian rhythms for a few days before sipping cocktails in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines for the rest of their trip, they can.

Hannah Smith, Virgin's country manager for the Caribbean, said: "Virgin Atlantic has invested heavily in its Caribbean portfolio over the last few years. Inter-island flying was incredibly popular, especially in July and August this year – it allows passengers to soak up the different personalities each destination has to offer."

Though inter-island connections are undoubtedly important, direct flight links have hefty economic and cultural value. In Tobago, the island's tourism 

authority subsidised the non-stop Virgin route from Heathrow until the end of 2022, by which time the return on investment had reduced so much that “[Virgin’s] contract could not be logically defended,” according to Alicia Edwards, executive chairwoman at Tobago Tourism Agency. However, hope has been expressed that Tobago could work with Virgin again in future.

SHAKE-UP START-UP

A new competitor has arrived on the scene, too. Norse Atlantic Airways launched two direct, low-cost routes from Gatwick to Montego Bay and Barbados on October 29.

“Jamaica and Barbados were obvious first choices,” said Philip Allport, senior vice-president of communications at Norse. “There’s potential for the low-cost, long-haul model to work [there] because they’re traditionally quite expensive destinations to fly to, as there aren’t a huge amount of direct options.”

The airline planned to launch two routes to Jamaica simultaneously – to the capital Kingston and Montego Bay – but dwindling demand for Kingston – but dwindling demand for Kingston meant Norse decided it made more sense to focus on Montego Bay.

For agents, a new low-cost carrier entering the Caribbean fray (and offering direct flights) could bring a different type of traveller to the Caribbean – the budget-conscious kind. “We’re trying to give everybody the opportunity to travel there, exactly how they want,” says Allport.

As for twin-stop routes, the status quo looks set to stay – but as Allport says, “the scales change quickly in aviation”. Should demand continue to rise for larger destinations such as Turks and Caicos – as well as smaller islands such as Anguilla and Dominica trying to make an entry into the UK market – it seems that airlines are, as ever, open to taking off wherever (and whenever) travellers want to go. **TW**

ROUTES TO THE CARIBBEAN FROM THE UK

BRITISH AIRWAYS

- ✈ Gatwick – Antigua (onward to Aruba, St Kitts and Tobago)
- ✈ Gatwick – Jamaica (Kingston)
- ✈ Gatwick – Saint Lucia (onward to Grenada and Guyana)
- ✈ Gatwick – Trinidad
- ✈ Heathrow – Bahamas (onward to Grand Cayman and Turks and Caicos)
- ✈ Heathrow – Barbados
- ✈ Heathrow – Bermuda

VIRGIN

- ✈ Heathrow – Antigua (resumes November 21)
- ✈ Heathrow – Bahamas
- ✈ Heathrow – Barbados (inter-island to Grenada and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines)
- ✈ Heathrow – Jamaica (Montego Bay)
- ✈ Heathrow – Saint Lucia (resumes December 4)

- ✈ Heathrow – Turks and Caicos (launches November 15)

NORSE

- ✈ Gatwick – Barbados
- ✈ Gatwick – Jamaica (Montego Bay)

TUI

- ✈ Gatwick, Birmingham, Manchester or Glasgow – Barbados
- ✈ Gatwick, Birmingham or Manchester – Dominican Republic (La Romana, starts December 24, 2024)
- ✈ Gatwick, Birmingham or Manchester – Dominican Republic (Punta Cana)
- ✈ Gatwick, Birmingham or Manchester – Jamaica (Montego Bay)
- ✈ Gatwick – Saint Lucia
- ✈ Manchester – Cuba (Varadero)

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