

BUD SLABBAERT, ORGANIZER OF THE CARIBBEAN AVIATION MEETUP IN DOMINICA, REVIEWS THE DEBUT EVENT

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The first Caribbean Aviation Meetup was held on June 14-16, 2016, in the Commonwealth of Dominica, the island nation located between Guadeloupe and Martinique in the eastern Caribbean. The event was an attempt to find solutions in a whirl of airlift challenges.

The Caribbean is one of the most complicated regions in the world for air transportation, the archipelago geography being the least of its problems. The real issue is the lack of ‘open sky’. Imagine a country with only dirt roads and national border controls and toll gates every 30 miles. That is the analog of inter-island air transportation in the Caribbean. You see the neighboring island on the horizon, but to get there takes at least half a day of traveling because of the difficult air connections. The air fares could be reasonable, but the imposed passenger fees double prices. Governments regard passengers as an ideal subject for taxation. A low-fare airline in the region belongs in a twilight zone between dreaming and failure; most regional airlines have financial difficulties. Yet, for many islands air transportation is a lifeline when up to 85% of the economy relies on tourism. With all these issues, and many more besides, the Caribbean Aviation Meetup was launched to provide a new platform for communication between the various stakeholders in air transportation in the Caribbean.

There are lots of airlift committees and taskforces in the manifold regional political and industry organizations. Studies are done and the conclusions boiled down to what’s needed and what the problems are. However, they don’t include clear guidelines on how to solve the challenges and especially not who will actually implement them if a decision is made.

The Caribbean Aviation Meetup aimed to solve this problem and it is hoped that the event will become an annual occurrence. It was a gathering of stakeholders in two industries – aviation and tourism – and used town-hall-type discussions to engage representatives of embattled airports, airlines, tourism authorities and hospitality associations in open dialogs. It is rare to find a conference where at the end of the scheduled 60-minute session, the chairman announces that the session will be extended, saying, “We are not going to stop, but discuss until we drop. This is too important!” All the presentations were introductions to their relevant subjects, providing the opportunity for interaction among the attendees and resulting in extremely lively debates.

The Meetup was proclaimed to be a result-oriented conference. One of the overall successes was the creation of a new essential communication platform; no participant could get away with excuses, hot air, shortcuts or deferment. As the host nation, Dominica benefited from having a mixture of industry professionals on its soil who commented on how Dominica could do more, while spending little or no money, to encourage more commercial, business and private aviation services to the island.

The next Caribbean Aviation Meetup will be held in June 2017 at a yet-to-be-determined location. The interactive conference format will be further developed and extended. ○



The event attracted worldwide coverage