

The TCIAA

GIVING WINGS TO THE TURKS
AND CAICOS ISLANDS





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RESEARCH BY *Joseph Philips*



The Turks and Caicos Islands are a Caribbean archipelago perhaps more traditionally accustomed to receiving cruise ships than airplanes. But since 2006, when the Turks and Caicos Islands Airport Authority (TCIAA) was established to control and manage the state-owned airports within the islands, the balance has been redressed. In 2018, the islands welcomed 1.52 million visitors - a new record, which was boosted by tourists flying in.

In 2019, the TCIAA refurbished its apron and terminal building at Salt Cay Airport and renewed the international safety certification for its aerodrome, promising further growth in the years ahead. In addition, it announced a series of upgrades to be made at its Providenciales and South Caicos airports.

substantial increase in passenger numbers. We've attracted new carriers and new routes, such as Southwest, Jet Blue, and United, we've moved from having low connectivity to a much broader-based connectivity. We have flights coming in from New York (JFK and Newark), Miami, Charlotte, NC, and Dallas, as well as the opening of a direct flight into the Eastern Caribbean - British Airways now operates a 777 twice weekly on Sunday and Thursday into Antigua."

Growth in tourism means economic impact on the ground. Even though passenger growth has exceeded all projections Mr. Smith, accepts the responsibility of finding a way to make it work, even if it means fast-tracking the new terminal at Providenciales to cope. He says: "We are a major employer,

"The first significant milestone was to develop the gateway airport of Providenciales International"

At an important juncture for the TCIAA, we caught up with John T. Smith, the Authority's CEO, about how the company's journey to here and where it fits into the future plans of the Turks and Caicos Islands.

The journey to here

Having joined TCIAA in 2007, Mr. Smith has been with the company almost since its inception. As he explains, the company had lost over \$3 million in its first year of operation, so he and the other members of the executive team - all locals - had their work cut out. He says: "the first significant milestone was to develop the gateway airport of Providenciales International. It meant a lot to the whole team, all of which were able to make a contribution to the airport's development."

This created a platform for attract more tourists. Mr. Smith says: "we're proud of the

not just by number with 354 employees, but by the significance of the work we do and the important role it plays on the main economic driver, which is tourism. About 84 percent, if not more, of the GDP of Turks and Caicos is generated from tourism. We have very few exports. Tourism is our bread and butter. Therefore, the importance of the airports and aviation cannot be overstated."

Creating a platform for growth

With the responsibility for all government aerodromes within the Turks and Caicos Islands, the TCIAA needs to ensure their continuous development to cater for tourism growth. Mr. Smith says: "Providenciales International Airport, known as the gateway, caters for 80 percent of our traffic. Salt Cay Airport has very seasonal traffic, while South Caicos Airport recently did rehabilitation work



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on its control tower and runway in phases one and two and we’re embarking on phase three, which includes construction of a terminal building, and a combined services building with a firehall and an engineering section.”

He continues: “Then we have North Caicos Airport - we’re in talks with the government and the Board to look at how best to go about developing that one. Because, while there isn’t a lot of existing traffic demand, there is a significant amount of development planned for North Caicos, so it makes good sense to have an airport there to facilitate that

development. Grand Turk is our other airport. Grand Turk, itself, is the capital of Turks and Caicos and where the government seat is located, even if it doesn’t generate much traffic in terms of tourist numbers.”

Challenges and Achievements

All of this has not been without its challenges, of course. Mr. Smith cites procurement as being one of the major hurdles that the TCIAA has had to overcome: “We are an island country - everything is imported - and trying to get equipment here in a timely manner can be



difficult. The other challenge we have is with our vehicles, mainly the fire engines, which are very costly. Operating in a salt environment, the rate of deterioration is much higher than elsewhere, and the replacement period is much shorter.”

On the achievement side, Mr. Smith is emphatic: “It’s all about recovery, and that starts with our wonderful local staff; the turnaround from losing \$3 million a year to generating revenues of \$37 million; the focus on infrastructure development in the five aerodromes the Authority is responsible for; and working with Tourism partners, we were able to increase passenger numbers from 20,000 per month in 2007, to averaging 42,000 per month, at present. In 2007, there was a two or three month off-season trough period. Today, we don’t really have an off-season.”

Partners and Suppliers

The small community (theTurks and Caicos Islands are home to no more than 30,000 locals), that the TCIAA operates in demands collaboration from everyone. Mr. Smith says: “it is incumbent upon us, working with the Hotel and Tourism Association and Tourist Board, to develop new routes, which makes sense because they have a vested interest in tourism, and they all bring different benefits to any negotiations.”

Private companies also play a role here. For example, RBS Architects were the sole



consultants for design technical work on the airports’ redevelopment, with EDS as the sub-consultant. Howard Industries provided much of the construction materials, while local firm Island Drilling Limited conducted much of the construction. Finally, well-known companies like TCA Handling, Cargo Express and Amadeus ensure that the airports daily operations run smoothly.

Looking to the Future

The Turks and Caicos Islands are second only to the Vatican City for tourist numbers per capita. It is the remit of the TCIAA - along with its partners - to ensure that this valuable source of revenue for the local economy continues to thrive. A new American Airlines route from Chicago will soon begin and a 7-storey Hilton Hotel will finish its construction, all pointing in the right direction.

This, along with the overhaul of the Providenciales Airport and the other aforementioned changes, all form part of the TCIAA’s Master Plan under Mr. Smith. This is a masterplan which the Authority can use as a template for future developments. Mr. Smith says: “As I always say, we are responsible for ‘sweating’ the assets’ on behalf of the government and the people.’ Those assets appear to be in good hands at the TCIAA, which is giving wings to the Turks and Caicos Islands. **BE**

RBS are a multi disciplinary consultancy, with associate offices in New York, Miami & London.

For the Providenciales International Air Terminal we acted, for TCIAA, as Architects, Cost Planners, Master Planners. Electrical / Mechanical engineers - with EDS acting as sub-consultants for structural & civil engineering.

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