

Air Caraïbes

‘Découvrez le Caraïbes Française...’

Air Caraïbes was founded in 1998 on the french island of Guadeloupe when it also started operations. In the year 2000 the French Caribbean airlines merged and Air Caraïbes became the main shareholder and main airline for the French Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe, Martinique, Saint Martin and Saint Barthélemy. All their activities and networks were merged into this airline. Air Caraïbes is also the first Caribbean airline to launch an alliance, named the CaribSky Alliance. This article will give a short overview of the history of the former French Caribbean airlines and the formation of the ‘new’ Air Caraïbes as the main airline of the French Caribbean islands. The article will then continue with the aircraft and route network of Air Caraïbes. The article is closed with a conclusion.

By Roger Cannegieter

History in Short

As mentioned above, Air Caraïbes already existed before the merger of the French Caribbean airlines. The roots of Air Caraïbes can be traced back to Guadeloupe. Their fleet consisted of one Beech King Air C90, two Beech King Air 200s, one Cessna Citation, two Britten Norman Islanders, three Cessna 208s, one DHC-6 Twin Otter and one Dornier 228. With these aircraft they offered scheduled and charter services between Saint Martin Grand Case, Saint Barthelemy and Point-a-Pitre, the capital of Guadeloupe. Air Guadeloupe was first known as Société Antillaise de Transport Aérien and was formed by Air France and the local government of Guadeloupe in 1969 both having a similar share in the airline. Air Guadeloupe started operations with a Fairchild FH-227 and introduced the first ATR42 in 1987. In 1997 their fleet consisted of two ATR42s, one ATR72, four Dornier 228 and two DHC-6 Twin Otter. Air Martinique was founded in 1974 as Compagnie Antillaise d’Affrètements Aériens-CAAA. In 1993 this name was changed into Société Nouvelle Air Martinique. They operated a fleet of two ATR42 and three Dornier 228

aircraft. In the late nineties Air Guadeloupe and Air Martinique operated a joint flight to Miami using a Boeing 737-200. Air Saint Martin and Air Saint Barthelemy operated a fleet of Cessna 208s. These aircraft were used on routes between the Saint Martin and Saint Barthélemy as well as the other French Caribbean islands. After the merger, these airlines kept operating these routes, but under the Air Caraïbes brand. In the year 2000 the former Air Caraïbes, Air Guadeloupe, Air Martinique, Air

Saint Martin and Air Saint Barthelemy joined forces to offer one airline that would give the French Caribbean islands a better and improved connectivity within the Caribbean and later introduced connections to France. With this merger, Air Caraïbes also introduced its new corporate livery. Air Caraïbes is the first Caribbean airline alliance which is named CaribSky. The main bases of Air Caraïbes are in Pointe-à-Pitre Le Raizet (PTP) in Guadeloupe and Fort-de-France Le Lamentin (FDF) in Martinique. In 2002 Air Caraïbes transported 445,000 passengers and earned 68 million Euro’s in revenue.

Aircraft Fleet And Route Network

After the merger, the fleet was initially based around the ATR72 and ATR42, the Dornier 228 and the Cessna 208. In 2001 Air Caraïbes added the ERJ-145 to its fleet to be able to serve more destinations in the Caribbean and joint flights with Air France to Miami. In december of 2003 Air Caraïbes introduced its first widebody aircraft, two ex-Swissair Airbus A330-200s. With these aircraft, Air Caraïbes started its first long-haul flights (to Paris-Orly). Their A330-200 is configured into three classes, being Madras (First Class), Caraïbes (Economy Plus) and Sun (Economy). Air Caraïbes awarded the maintenance contract to SR Techniks for the two A330-200s.



*Air Caraïbes AI(R) ATR-72-500 at Philipsburg / St. Maarten - Princess Juliana Airport
Photo by Carlos Aleman - SJU Aviation Photography*

The ERJ-145, ATR72, ATR42, Dornier 228 and Cessna 208 are used for its caribbean routes to and from Santo Domingo, Les Saintes, Saint Lucia, Saint Barthélemy, Marie-Galante, Port-au-Prince, Union Grenadines, La Désirade, Saint Martin, Fort-de-France, Port of Spain, Belem (Brazil) and Cayenne (Guyana). The last three destinations were part of an expansion plan. The Airbus A330-200 is used on Air Caraïbes' international flights to Paris-Orly. The European Commission authorised the French State to aid Air Caraïbes in purchasing one new Cessna 208 to replace an older aircraft. This would reduce the operating costs on the regional services of Air Caraïbes. Air Caraïbes operates to 13 cities and employs about 370 people. As for expansion plans, Air Caraïbes will dispose of the ATR42 and replace them with the ATR72 to meet the increase in passenger traffic. Air Caraïbes now operates the newest ATR type, being the ATR72-500. The last ATR72-500 will join the fleet in November of 2005.

The current fleet of Air Caraïbes comprises the following aircraft:

- 2 Airbus A330-200
- 2 Embraer ERJ-145
- 2 ATR 72-500
- 4 Dorniers 228
- 6 Cessna 208

Daily flights between Saint Martin and San Juan (Puerto Rico) started on February 1st of 2001. Five of these flights were operated from Saint Martin Grand Case, which is on the french side of St. Maarten. Flights from Fort-de-France to Cayenne via Port of Spain were launched on October 29th of 2001. These flights are operated on behalf of Air France. The most frequented islands are Saint Martin and Saint Barthélemy. Services from Santo Domingo to Saint Martin were launched on December 16th of 2002, using the ERJ-145.



Air Caraïbes route network (Air Caraïbes website)

CaribSky Alliance

The CaribSky Alliance was launched on January 8th of 2001 and also comprised Winair of St. Maarten and LIAT of the Leeward Islands. The reason for this alliance was for the islands (and their airlines) to collaborate on the thirty two airports these airlines serve in order to cut costs and increase revenue on their routes. The main reason for this alliance was for these airlines to focus on their routes from their home bases and feed traffic to the other alliance members. The bases of this alliance are: Barbados (LIAT), Antigua (LIAT), Saint Lucia (LIAT), San Juan (LIAT), St. Maarten (Winair), Guadeloupe (Air Caraïbes) and Santo Domingo (Air Caraïbes).

Conclusion

Since the merger of the French Caribbean airlines into Air Caraïbes, the airline has slowly expanded its presence in the Caribbean, with a strong presence in the french western caribbean. As mentioned in the article, Air Caraïbes is also expanding in other parts of the Caribbean, and also operates non-stop flights to Paris. With one of the most modern aircraft fleets in the region combined with a very attractive new Caribbean livery, Air Caraïbes has become a formidable competitor in their region.



*Air Caraïbes Embraer EMB-145 in Hybrid Air Caraïbes/Air France colours at Pointe-a-Pitre - Le Raizet, Guadeloupe, August 2003
Photo by Gilles Bussutil*

Sources:

- <http://www.aircaraibes.com>
- http://www.janes.com/transport/news_briefs/jwa/article/jwa050208_01.shtml
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_Caraïbes
- <http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/03/1741&format=HTML&aged=0&language=en&guiLanguage=en>
- <http://www.caribbeanaviation.com/alliances.htm>
- North American Airlines Handbook 1997*
- Airlines Worldwide by B.I. Hengi, 1994*