Floatplanes in Paradise

Flying by the Soles of Your Feet



Tony Dixon visits the Maldives and flies with Trans Maldivian Airways carrying tourists to their resorts from the main hub airport.

With more than 40 de Havilland Canada DHC-6 Twin Otters from two carriers – Trans Maldivian Airways (TMA) and Maldivian Air Taxi (MAT) – in one place, the floatplane terminal at Ibrahim Nasir International Airport is an absolute magnet for aviation enthusiasts. The hub, on Hulhulé Island in the North Malé Atoll, is close to the island's capital Malé, which is actually on another island, and it serves as a staging post for the international airlines carrying visitors in and out of the country. Tourism being its main source of income. Most of the passengers are then transferred to the two local airlines for onward flights to their resort destinations.

All change

During the *Airliner World* visit in January 2013, the two floatplane carriers operated as separate entities with different managerial and engineering structures. However, this all changed on February 1, when the companies were amalgamated, after one of the world's leading investment and advisory firms, Blackstone, took a majority stake in both of the operators.

Following the acquisition, Lars Erik Nielsen (the founder of MAT) and Lars Petré and Hussain Afeef (majority shareholders of TMA) retained a substantial shareholding. They serve as board directors and continue to play a significant role as both companies transition into a single entity.

The floatplane experience

Passengers arriving in the Maldives, clear security and immigration at the main airport terminal. Once 'landside', there are two options; those stopping at resorts within around 20 miles (33km) of Malé travel onwards by sea while others have the delight of a floatplane ride. The airport takes up most of the island on which it is built so even passengers arriving simply on business to the country have to travel onwards to the capital city by boat.

Tourists are generally greeted by their holiday company representatives and directed to a row of booths serving different resorts. From there passengers are given details of the relevant flight (and in January which of the then two »

With full power applied the de Havilland Canada DHC-6-300 Twin Otter is soon at take-off speed.

"THE FLYING TIME FROM HERE [MALÉ] TO RESORTS VARIES BETWEEN 25 AND 40 MINUTES, AND PASSENGERS CAN TAKE IN THE BREATHTAKING AERIAL VIEW OF THE CORAL ISLANDS, CORAL REEFS AND SHALLOWS OF THE MALDIVIAN ARCHIPELAGO,"

Managing Director Edward Alsford

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Bottom right • **Passengers are guided from the main terminal to a waiting mini-bus (in the airline's colours), or in some cases a limousine – depending on the status of the resort.** (All photos via Trans Maldivian Airways unless stated)

Right • **"We have changed from being reactive to becoming proactive and have found that it has saved us time in the long run. Even one of the new Series 400s was delivered 'green' (unpainted) and we did it here," said Engineering and Maintenance Manager, Ahmed (Shad) Shahid.**

Below • **The growth in TMA's business during 2009/2010 threatened to saturate our facilities, so we instigated a series of expansions and improvements." Managing Director Edward Alsford**

airlines would carry them) and proceed to the check-in area for TMA or MAT. Here all baggage is weighed (including carry-ons, limited to just 11lb [5kg]) before passengers are guided to a waiting mini-bus (in the airline's colours), or in some cases a limousine – depending on the status of the resort.

The terminal at Ibrahim Nasir International Airport is located on the western side of the north/south runway and is currently being renovated. The floatplane terminal is to the east so vehicles have to make a quick five-minute transit via the airport's perimeter road to the south. On arrival there, all are warmly greeted by members of the airline's Central Reservations team who direct the passengers to relevant waiting areas. There are 13 bespoke resort lounges in the TMA terminal and a standard departures area with a café and souvenir shop for travellers who are simply using the carrier to go from A to B. The lounges are operated by resort (not airline) staff, and visitors are welcomed with a cold towel and offered hot or cold drinks. TMA tries to cut waiting time to a minimum, but with some resorts expecting guests from two or three different inbound flights, a short wait is sometimes unavoidable. Resorts use this time for guests to complete a formal check-in proforma.

"THERE ARE 13 DIFFERENT BESPOKE RESORT LOUNGES IN THE TRANS MALDIVIAN AIRWAYS TERMINAL."

Outside, the Twin Otters are coming and going regularly with inbound flights bringing tourists at the end of their holidays to the larger aircraft waiting at the airport, so timings and punctuality are of the essence. TMA and MAT can carry around 1,200 passengers each on a busy day with the maximum load being around 12-14 (plus bags). When the flight is ready to depart, passengers are personally escorted via floating pontoons to board the aircraft.

The interior has a two-plus-one seating arrangement with the luggage loaded at the rear – everyone is close to a window and a view of the cockpit as there is no dividing door. Once all are seated, the captain turns around and gives the safety briefing, sortie length and wishes everyone a pleasant trip. All the crew routinely wear flip-flops. Before engine start the footwear is taken off and left on the cockpit floor, leaving the pilots to fly barefoot! The cabin crew, who has remained outside, then pushes the front of the float away from the dock and, once the engines are started, releases the mooring rope and jumps onboard to sit at the rear. The pilots are careful to navigate out of the dock area watching for other aircraft moving in and out – both from TMA and MAT (operating from the adjoining docks). There are two north/south 'runways' in use – in reality they are merely cleared areas away from any underwater coral – normally one for landing and one for take off. With clearance from Air Traffic Control, and co-ordination with traffic using the concrete runway, full power is applied and the aircraft accelerates. It gets airborne just before its single-engine safety speed, so the pilots deliberately keep the aircraft low for a few seconds to let the speed build. Transits are normally made at an altitude of around 2,000ft – staggered between inbounds and outbounds for safety reasons – giving passengers a great view of the various islands and reefs. All too soon, power is reduced and the aircraft begins its approach. Initially just skimming the surface of the water, as soon as the floats 'bite' the aircraft stops quickly and taxies either to a dock next to the resort or to a moored offshore pontoon – depending on the facilities available – and the cabin crew jumps out to moor the rear of the floats. After the engines are stopped, a small traditional 'dhoni' boat arrives and the passengers disembark onto it. The luggage is promptly unloaded and the boat leaves for the island. Often, a second dhoni is waiting with its outbound load back to Malé, but sometimes the crew members can take advantage of a short break, either way the aircraft is soon airborne again on its next sortie.





Left • **The new terminal was opened in November 2010 and then the dock area was extended. In 2012, TMA managed to board destination-bound flights for 55% of the arriving passengers within 30 minutes of their arrival at the sea plane terminal.**

Below • **The carrier's terminal has a standard departures area with a café and souvenir shop if local travellers are simply using the airline to go from A to B.** (Airliner World)

Bottom • **The 13 bespoke resort lounges are operated by resort (not airline) staff and visitors are welcomed with a cold towel and offered a choice of hot or cold drinks.** (Airliner World)



The Maldives

At a maximum ground height of 7ft 10in (2.4m) above sea level, the Republic of the Maldives is the lowest lying country in the world. Located just to the north of the equator and south of India and Sri Lanka, it consists of 26 atolls and 1,192 islands – of which just 192 are inhabited. Many of the islands are simply resorts with no local inhabitants (other than staff). The country's main attractions – apart from the excellent weather – are superb beaches, scuba diving and snorkelling. The outstanding coral atolls teem with multi-coloured fish and the local government ensures the environment is well protected with 'dos and don'ts' when swimming – including 'no touching' the reefs.

TMA Operations

Airliner World spoke to TMA's Managing Director, Edward Alsford, who was appointed in 2008. "I thought I was applying for the Operations Manager post and it was only after the interview that I was told that I had the Managing Director's position," the Englishman said in his office overlooking the aircraft at the dock. Edward started in the aviation business at London/Heathrow controlling vehicle movements before joining British Mediterranean Airways (BMED) in December 1998 as an operations control assistant. He rose to become Operations Manager before moving to GB Airways as Head of Operations in 2007. When the carrier was taken over by easyJet in early 2008, he was faced with possible redundancy, so looked elsewhere.

"The growth in TMA's business in the 2009/10 threatened to saturate our facilities, so we instigated a series of expansions and improvements," he said. "This new terminal was opened in »





TMA history

Originally called Hummingbird Island Helicopters, TMA is the oldest of the two island carriers and was founded in 1989. The company initially used Sikorsky S-61Ns and then Russian-built Mil Mi-8s, and introduced its first seaplanes in the shape of Cessna Caravans and Twin Otters in 1997, before phasing out the helicopters soon afterwards. There had been some safety issues with the Russian types, but the main problem was that there were only five helipads on the islands serving eight resorts – of the 82 available at the time – and the sand thrown up from arriving or departing flights was substantial. The growth of tourism meant that more islands wanted air links and there was not the space for helipads. The floatplane was the answer. The transition to a 'seaplane-only' fleet was completed in January1999, and the growing number of passengers meant that the Caravans were soon sold in favour of further, more-powerful Twin Otter 300s. In 2012, it added the first of three Viking Air Twin Otter Series 400s.



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