

Bahamasair Should Not Fly To Jamaica...

Why does this government persist on making these very stupid, expensive and asinine decisions? The nation's flag carrier (Bahamasair) has proven, beyond any doubt, that it cannot effectively service even its semi-monopolized domestic market, yet it now plans to go international with twice-weekly scheduled flights to and from Jamaica beginning in May?

Given the company's very unsound financial position and, worse still, its' normal standard of mediocre service, my guess is that this attempt at spreading its wings is doomed to fail even before lift off. It was only a few weeks ago (we should remember) that Bahamasair was breaking down the doors of parliament attempting to secure additional funding for its local operations. They requested some \$14 million for immediate expenses.

The cabinet minister responsible for the government-owned entity informed its management that the country's cash-strapped public treasury, which happens to be the badly-managed airline's sole financier, could not spare the \$14 million they requested but could only afford to hand over half that amount, as things were tougher than tough, with the country's purse. You tell me, therefore, how in the hell we are going to service a twice-weekly schedule back and forth to anywhere internationally, when in fact we cannot afford the cost of our local scheduled runs?

According to the airline's media release, their plans are to dedicate one of the only two 120-seater jets to service the route and hence one of my reasons for suggesting early failure in this effort, even before lift off. One jet aircraft cannot possibly service such a route with any degree of dependability or longevity; there have to be more aircraft and equipment dedicated to this service, in order to provide service that would be minimally dependable to its patrons and, simultaneously, guarantee some kind of financial returns to its shareholders - the Bahamian people.

This decision was made, I believe, grudgingly, only to compete with Western Air in an effort to retard the momentum of their growth in the industry, and in an attempt to putting them completely out of business on that route. To some, this may seem a farfetched scenario, but I know of what I speak.

I have very good reasons for believing that within the cabinet of The Bahamas, there is an element of hatred for Western Air's operations and for its successes to date in competing with the country's national flag carrier. There are those who would not shed a tear if this very efficient private Bahamian airliner goes completely out of business once and for all. And just to think, Western Air's owners, I am told, have always been favourable to FNM Administrations and have been huge financial contributors to their political campaigns with -cash, flights and anything else otherwise - I am assured.

When Air Jamaica announced its intention to discontinue servicing the Jamaica - Nassau route, claiming it to be unprofitable for them; Bahamasair indicated a strong unwillingness to pick it up, at the time, so Western Air, being the aggressive entrepreneurs they are known to be, grasped at the opportunity and secured all the permissions required and necessary for the continuity of the service.

Western Air's owners moved very quickly to secure an area at Grand Bahama International Airport for their base of operations and began construction on the \$4 million hanger buildings necessary for the maintenance of their aircraft, assigned specifically for the Bahamas - Jamaica schedule. Then, out of the blue-and just like a dog-in-the-manger, the FNM government changed its mind and decided that Bahamasair would put in a service, after all, to compete with Western Air on this route. This is a route, I might add, which Air Jamaica gave up for the simple reason, as they said, that there was no money to be made flying back and forth between Jamaica and Nassau, using the kind of equipment they were using on the flights.

In my view, if one airline, with a monopoly no less, found the route unprofitable, what is it that the Board of Bahamasair, the Minister and the FNM government know that I don't, which would cause them to conclude that two airlines, competing on the route (one with daily flights and the other with two flights per week) could reasonably be expected to make the kind of profits necessary to keep them both airborne? I very seriously doubt their business rationale.

Even marginally prudent governments are expected to make more intelligent decisions than what this FNM bunch have made here, in this case. This is simply a dumb decision and I've searched the English language, diligently, and for the life of me could not find words to say, what I've said here about the decision makers in this case, any nicer.

Western Air has spent almost \$1 million in preparation for this route; how much more would the government be obliged to budget in order to prepare Bahamasair? Bahamasair is cash-strapped; remember? Permit me to reiterate; last month they requested the government to give them \$14 million; the minister told them that the government could only allow them half of what they requested or \$7 million, so who are we kidding? Whoever so foolishly gave the final, "ok to go ahead", decision to spend taxpayers money - which is already in drastically short supply - ought to have their head(s) examined and should not delay, by any means, their next visit to their psychiatrist.

Western Air's domestic operation is a testimony to what ordinary Bahamians can do if they apply themselves and are given the opportunity to do so. The FNM, of course, has no faith in Bahamians to do anything right, especially Bahamians of colour. I am told that Western Air's owner, himself, has given clear instructions to all his staff members that they are not to delay flights for anyone, not even for him or any member of his family. Get those flights in the air and on time is his motto, I am told. This attitude, which impresses me tremendously, is obviously the hallmark reason for most of the airline's successes to date.

I have long since abandoned Bahamasair as my carrier of choice, for the times I rarely do find it necessary to fly, except in circumstances where I simply cannot avoid doing so. I like the idea of leaving and arriving on time, which was hardly ever my experience with Bahamasair. Besides, when or if Western Air is ever late for a scheduled flight, the staff are always so very courteous in how they deal with their sometimes irate passengers. I have found this to be the case, unlike my experiences with the nation's flag carrier.

Someone once asked a Bahamasair representative; why should I pay my own money to be abused and treated like an animal, by you? That was, indeed, a very good question; and why would you?

The country's flag carrier will find, very soon after the start up of their

Jamaican flights, that Western Air is in a far better position than they could ever be with respect to holding the line on operational expenses as its aircraft are smaller, more suited to the route and measurably less expensive to operate, and that will count for a lot.

Bahamasair would do well to abandon this foolish notion about flying to Jamaica and leave that route to Western Air's operators, exclusively. They would, if it were left to them, I believe, make a successful go at it. Who knows, Western Air may find it so lucrative that they may even cut back on their domestic schedule, allowing Bahamasair to access a larger "up-for-grabs" domestic passenger pool, in which to compete. This Jamaican route, in my view, will be Bahamasair's death knell, if they persist.

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