

VC Bird International Airport

DESTINATION THE IDYLIC ISLES





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Antigua and Barbuda is a top 20 destination, favoured by the wealthy: its economy was hit by the recession but tourists are now returning, and China, which is helping it build a new terminal at VC Bird International Airport, may provide a major new source of Caribbean sun seekers



Hhe Rt Hon Dr Vere Cornwall Bird Sr was the first Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda, serving from 1981 to 1994, just five years before his death in 1999 - and upon retirement he was declared a national hero. Bird was unique among West Indian politicians, lacking any formal education except primary schooling. He was an officer in the Salvation Army for two years but because he saw the way the land owners were treating the local black Antiguan and Barbudans he decided to leave his post to fight for the freedom of his people. His drive, conviction and passion for Antigua propelled VC Bird to get involved in the independence process for Antigua in 1981. If it wasn't for his

passion Antigua would not be entering its 33rd year of independence.

In 1985 Antigua's international airport, which was first named Coolidge, was renamed V.C. Bird International Airport in his honour. The history of the airport goes back to 1942, when the United States Army constructed an aerodrome in Antigua for military use. A few years later in 1949, The USA turned the base over to the Government of Antigua and Barbuda. Civilian use of the airport commenced in 1952 and the airport became known as the Coolidge Airport. During the 1960s to early 70s, runway and airside improvements were carried out and the runway 07/25 was extended to 5,700 ft, then to 7,500 ft and finally in 1972

extended to 9,000 ft through a grant by the Canadian Government.

Later that decade the parking apron was further expanded and two additional parking positions were installed for turbo-prop aircraft. A new passenger terminal building was constructed in 1982 and became operational north of the previous terminal and consisted of an area space of 60,000 square feet. Over the years V C Bird International Airport attracted arrivals by PanAM, Eastern Airlines, Trans Canada Air Lines (now Air Canada), Air France, American Airlines, BWIA, British Airways, Lufthansa and LIAT with services to the Caribbean, North America and The United Kingdom and Europe.

Tourism has always dominated Antigua and Barbuda's economy, accounting for nearly 60 percent of GDP and 40 percent of investment. The islands are nothing if not idyllic, and Barbuda has been described as, almost literally, one big beach. Its position at the centre of the Leeward Islands makes it accessible to visitors from North America, Europe and South America, a fact not unrelated to the rapid expansion and strategic importance of VC Bird International. However the country has its eye on China as a very large source of future tourists. As Antigua's Ambassador to China David Shoul puts it: "There's no reason why Antigua should not be the hub for Chinese tourists flying in to

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join cruise ships and explore the Caribbean.”

The airport is key to this aspiration. In the words of minister of tourism, John Maginley: “The first and last impression you have of Antigua and Barbuda is the airport. So if we have an efficient entrance into Antigua and people leave the country comfortable we think this will all augur very well for our tourism product. The airlines are very excited because we will be looking after their customers at a higher level than we are doing currently.”

Maginley is referring to the current expansion programme that has seen a new terminal, as part of a larger expansion of airport facilities. The 23,000 square metre terminal will feature four jet bridges, 26 check-in counters, 20 immigration desks, retail space, a food court, modern amenities and wi-fi access. work began in November 2011 on the construction of the terminal building which is designed to handle 1,800 passengers per hour and up to 1.5 million passengers per year. The project is being financed by The People’s Republic of China and constructed by The China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation. Though completion has been delayed, the latest estimate is that the building will be ready to be commissioned during the first half of 2015. In a visit to the construction

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site earlier this year Antigua and Barbuda prime minister, Baldwin Spencer, said, "When I last toured the terminal I knew it was going to be a good facility but now that I have seen the progress this is absolutely amazing. This will take Antigua and Barbuda to the top level where airport terminals are concerned."

The government said the economy of Antigua and Barbuda has benefited from the project, with around 50 Antiguan and Barbudans currently employed at the construction site. "Over US\$50 million has been pumped back into this economy because a number of sub-contractors and a number of agencies have been involved in providing services, and moving goods and equipment from areas such as the Deep Water Harbour. Certainly a number of local people have benefited directly from this project," Spencer added.

One positive step, vital before the terminal can be put into operation, has just been taken.

As of October 30 The 10 member transitional team that will oversee the move to the new terminal is now in place. The committee, chaired by Chief Executive Officer of the Antigua and Barbuda Airport Authority Stanley Smith, is tasked with educating the public on what will take place during the transition period. The team will also oversee training programmes for staff members at the authority. "We had our official meeting a few weeks ago," Smith said. "During that meeting I outlined the process and the expectations and from that they have formed some sub-committees." Smith said the group will communicate with the public about the progress of the ongoing construction prior to the opening date of the multi-million dollar facility.

So though the date for the handover of the new terminal building has been pushed back until next year, it's still doing well given the difficult economic climate, he believes:

"The building has progressed much faster than we had anticipated; they are now doing the tiling of the upper floor so the building will be completed on time, it's just that we have some slight delays," he said. The fundamentals support his enthusiasm. UK visitor numbers for the first half of 2014 are up by 17 percent from 2013. Traditionally a high-end destination, based on the wealth of four and five-star hotel stock available, and the cost of flights, business has been affected by consumers tightening their belts, but the islands are bouncing back post-recession. **BE**

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