

Air Jamaica resuming flights to St Lucia

CASTRIES, St Lucia (AP) - Air Jamaica will resume service to St Lucia in February 2006, offering nonstop flights three times a week to and from New York, an official said Friday.

Air Jamaica suspended service in March to the Caribbean islands of Barbados, Grenada and St Lucia, in an attempt to recover from losses due to higher fuel costs and a drop in passengers after the Sept 11 attacks.

O K Melhado, the recently appointed chairman of the troubled airline, which is facing a loss of over J\$8 billion this year, revealed two Fridays ago that a review of the strategies that have defined the airline since its re-acquisition by the government last December was underway.

Melhado attributed a big chunk of this year's loss to the grounding of half of Air Jamaica's then 20-plane fleet for maintenance by the Jamaica Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), at the prodding of America's Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

Consequently, a critical part of the review, Melhado explained, will be how to keep the Air Jamaica planes flying longer hours so as to better amortise the investment in the aircraft.

According to the chairman, the carrier has to increase the flying time of its planes from an average of about eight hours a day to around 12 hours a day.,

"What it means is a lot of rethinking of our schedules - finding ways to add frequency of routes that we are on, and expanding. That requires proper research before you do these things," Melhado said in a radio interview two weeks ago.

The airline, which has restarted flights to the other two islands, will resume flights to St Lucia in February, said Allen Chastanet, president of the St Lucia Hotel and Tourism Association.

Last year 29,000 tourists visited from the US - St Lucia's biggest tourism market, Chastanet said.

Air Jamaica started flying to St Lucia, an island in the southeast Caribbean Sea, in 1997.

**Associated Press and Observer
Saturday, December 24, 2005**