

## Branson upbeat about Virgin flights

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Famous adventurer and chairman of Virgin Atlantic Airways, Sir Richard Branson (centre), is flanked by Jamaican models and members of his flight crew as he poses on the wing of the Boeing 747 aircraft following its inaugural flight from London to Montego Bay at the Sangster International Airport yesterday. Virgin will make two scheduled flights to Jamaica each week. - NOEL THOMPSON/FREELANCE PHOTOGRAPHER

WESTERN BUREAU:

**AT 12:40 P.M. on Monday, the eccentric and charismatic Sir Richard Branson stood on the upper deck cabin of his 747-400 series Virgin Atlantic aircraft waving a Jamaican flag in his left hand and a British flag in his right.**

As the plane taxied on to the runway of the Sangster International Airport, Branson, known for his unorthodox methods, had onlookers in awe as he appeared on the wings dressed in a Rastafarian headpiece on the arms of two Jamaican models.

Virgin Atlantic was making its inaugural flight into Montego Bay, packed to capacity with 451 passengers ready to make their addition to the island's tourist industry figures. Stopover arrivals from the United Kingdom for the period January to May this year rebounded to yield a 12 per cent increase over the same period last year.

Addressing journalists at the Half Moon Hotel shortly after the flight, Minister of Tourism, Entertainment and Culture, Aloun Assamba, said the proven impact that increased airlift has on the performance of the sector has been reflected in the arrival figures out of the U.K. last year.

"Last winter season saw an additional 90,000 seats without any drop in percentage uptake ... the seats are being filled. The only European destination which has seen a decline so far this year is Italy - on closer examination, the only factor that changed significantly was a reduction in seats into Jamaica."

### OPTIMISTIC

Branson said that he was optimistic about the prospects, having had great success with Barbados. "We started with three flights per week in Barbados and are now up to eight," he boasted.

He said Montego Bay would be Virgin Atlantic's 27th route worldwide and its eighth Caribbean route. The airline will fly into Montego Bay twice weekly, Mondays and Wednesdays.