

Virgin makes maiden flight to Jamaica

Virgin boss promises better value for money

MONTEGO BAY, St James - Virgin Atlantic Airways, the second largest British airline, made its inaugural flight to this resort city yesterday bringing 451 passengers from England, including its chief executive officer, billionaire Richard Branson, his parents Ted and Eve Branson, and a slew of British media personnel.

When the Boeing 747 400 aircraft landed at the Sangster International Airport at about 12:40 pm - amidst much fanfare and excitement - it signalled the start of twice weekly flights between Montego Bay and London's Gatwick International Airport on Mondays and Wednesdays.



Virgin Atlantic Airways CEO Richard Branson displays a replica of one of his planes, while Jamaica's Tourism Minister Aloun Assamba shows off this Everaldo Powell ceramic piece titled 'The Journey' shortly after Virgin Atlantic's inaugural flight from London touched down in Montego Bay yesterday. Branson presented the replica to Assamba, who in turn presented him with the artwork. (Photo: Horace Hines)

Officials at the airline believe that the new service will bring at least 100,000 more visitors from the United Kingdom within the first 12 months.

As the aircraft rolled up on the runway yesterday, Branson, dressed in a pair of jeans and black, green and gold T-shirt emblazoned with the name 'Jamaica', emerged from a roof door in the cockpit waving British and Jamaican flags.

Shortly afterwards, he posed with two Jamaican showgirls on one of the plane's wings before kissing the runway's asphalt after being received by tourism officials, including Tourism Minister Aloun Assamba and Jamaica

Hotel and Tourist Association President Horace Peterkin.



The Observer's Vernon Webb watches as Virgin Atlantic Airways CEO Richard Branson leafs through a laminated copy of the Observer supplement welcoming Virgin Atlantic's service to Jamaica. Webb presented the special copy of the supplement to Branson at the Half Moon Hotel yesterday. (Photos: Horace Hines)

He later said in a release that Virgin was delighted to commence service to the island, adding that passengers travelling the Montego Bay/London route now stand to benefit from increased competition, which, he argued, would ultimately lead to "better value for money" and quality service.

Branson's father, Ted, said he was happy to be in Jamaica and pledged to have a good time before returning to England later this week.

"I am happy to be here to support and celebrate with my son," Ted Branson said.

His wife, Eve, was also very happy to be in the island and promised to return in the near future.

It was their first visit to Jamaica.

Virgin Atlantic began service to the Caribbean in 1988 with flights to Barbados, St Lucia and Antigua. In 2003, the airline launched weekly services to Grenada and Tobago and then in 2004 a twice weekly service to Cuba and weekly service to The Bahamas.

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