



1 PHOTO: PUJ

PUNTA CANA

International Airport

by SANTIAGO FITTIPALDI

WHEN PUNTA CANA International Airport (PUJ) opened in 1984, some visitors joked that its thatched roofed open-air terminal would fit nicely on Gilligan's Island. Several million dollars' worth of upgrades and expansions later, PUJ is today the main gateway for travelers arriving in the Dominican Republic, the Caribbean's largest tourism destination. And the expansion drive is far from over.

The airport welcomed a mere 2,800 passengers in its first year of operation. In 2015, that number had soared to nearly 6.5 million, accounting for more than half of all passenger arrivals at the Dominican Republic's eight international airports and contributing to the country's tourism sector development. PUJ was among the engines that drove the construction of the grand total of 40,000 hotel rooms expected to be in operation

in the Punta Cana area by year-end, according to data compiled by the airport's management.

"Normally, you have a community that builds an airport, but we are an airport that built a community," said Walter Zemialkowski, Operations Director at PUJ.

In the early days, he recalled, PUJ mainly attracted flights from neighboring Puerto Rico on the now-defunct Prinair (PQ). "On weekends, we would have to bring in Customs and Immigration officials from the airport in Santo Domingo (SDQ) to service the flights," he said.

Today, the airport is the second-busiest in the Caribbean after San Juan's Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport (SJU). With direct flights from more than 28 countries and 96 cities



PHOTO: BRIAN CORONA 2



PHOTO: PUJ 3



4 PHOTO: PUJ

worldwide, PUJ touts itself as the fastest-growing airport in the Caribbean. Zemialkowski feels that San Juan is holding on to its number-one position on account of its cruise ship traffic. “If you took the cruise ship passengers out of the San Juan data, then we would be number one,” he noted.

PRE-CLEARANCE AND GROWTH

PUJ was chosen in 2015 to become only the third Caribbean airport with US Customs and Immigration pre-clearance. When the program is rolled out on November 1, 2016, passengers will be able to complete the screening process before arriving in the US—in essence, flying as if on a domestic flight. Aruba and Nassau are the other two Caribbean destinations approved by the US federal government to offer such convenience, and the next round of approvals is not scheduled until 2020.

“We had been trying to get pre-clearance for 10 years,” Zemialkowski told *Airways*. He said that the move is a win-win for the US and the Dominican Republic. “From the perspective of the US, your frontline of defense is at the point of origin of the flight, while flights from Punta Cana will be able to arrive at domestic gates in Miami,

which, for point-to-point low-cost carriers, is a good thing, and the airlines are excited.”

Once the program goes into effect, the airport will add four more parking positions to handle the expected increase in aircraft movements. It is also seeking ways to offer passengers more shopping and dining options once they have been screened. “One of the major complaints that they have at the pre-clearance facilities currently in operation is that there is often a lack of food courts and duty-free shops available to passengers once they have been cleared and are in a sterile area,” Zemialkowski said. The non-aeronautical revenue generated by these facilities also helps keep costs down for airlines at PUJ, he noted.

The airport’s owner, Corporación Aeroportuaria del Este, a division of the Puntacana Resort & Club, remains in expansion mode. In 2011, PUJ added a second runway, a new control tower, and several taxiways. The second runway, 10,200ft (3,100m) in length, was added to accommodate increasing traffic demand. The construction project made PUJ the sole airport in the Dominican Republic with two runways and the only one in the Caribbean with two runways longer than 9,800ft (3,000m). Also in response to increased traffic,

- 1 More airlines are adding the popular tourism destination to their route networks.
- 2 The airport expanded customs and immigration areas to meet increased passenger traffic.
- 3 PUJ is owned and operated by a division of the nearby Puntacana Resort & Club.
- 4 Airport revenues from retail concessions are helping to keep airline costs down.



Punta Cana is the only airport in the Dominican Republic with two runways.

PHOTO: PUJ 5

in 2014, the airport added a second terminal (Terminal Bravo) and, for the first time, installed jet bridges. It also added a fuel hydrant system to eliminate the need for fuel trucks.

In 2015, PUJ launched a renovation plan for Terminal Alpha that was completed in December, just in time for the tourism high season that attracts travelers from cold-weather cities in North America and Europe. The project included the expansion of the older terminal's Customs, Immigration and Departures areas. Also in December 2015, the airport completed construction of a new taxiway, which Giovanni Rainieri, Operations Manager-Airside at PUJ, said was needed "to improve the flow of departures when we have Runway 26 in use, reducing delays and fuel consumption".

Zemialkowski said that the renovation and ongoing expansion were aimed at improving the overall passenger experience.

NOT THE USUAL DESTINATION

"The minute you get passengers off the plane, you want them to feel they're on vacation," he

said. The airport's slogan on its website is, 'Fly Direct to Paradise'.

"When our plane landed from Toronto (YYZ), the first thing we heard was a live group playing merengue music and some of the passengers started dancing," said Craig Shaw, a Canadian vacationing at one of the area's resorts. "We thought that, if that's what the airport is like, we know we're going to have fun here."

Keeping the thatched roofs and open-air terminals contributes to the tropical experience. The supporting columns are made of native tree trunks, and local stone is used throughout the complex. Terminal Alpha was designed by Dominican architect Oscar Imbert, known for conceiving some of the country's premier resorts and private residences. Terminal Bravo was designed by his nephew, Antonio Segundo Imbert.

"You have to design your airport for the environment you're living in, promoting local culture and history," Zemialkowski said. "We're in the middle of a resort and we're also the first and last impression for people visiting the Dominican

PUNTA CANA BY THE NUMBERS



WORLD RANKING
#255
Per total seats offered



TRAFFIC
+7.54%
(2015 VS. 2014)



DESTINATIONS
57
non-stop

“YOU HAVE TO DESIGN YOUR AIRPORT FOR THE ENVIRONMENT YOU’RE LIVING IN, PROMOTING LOCAL CULTURE AND HISTORY.”

Republic; so, for us, it’s important to maintain a positive image throughout the airport experience.”

Terminal Alpha is a 484,000sq ft (45,000m²) facility, while Terminal Bravo covers 258,000sq ft (24,000m²), offering such conveniences as mobile phone-charging stations and free Wi-Fi throughout the complex.

The airport also operates a fixed-base operator (FBO) offering general aviation and executive jet services as well as a VIP terminal. VIP services and fast-track customs and immigration are also offered at the main terminals for a fee.

PUJ’s new cargo terminal, part of the 2014 expansion drive, functions as a distribution center for products shipped from South America to markets in the US, Canada, and Europe. The products most often in transit include fresh-cut flowers, seafood, and medical equipment. The terminal has 4,300sq ft (400m²) of cold storage space for perishables.

SUSTAINED GROWTH AS A PRIVATE ENTITY

Zemialkowski believes that the airport’s private ownership has facilitated its growth. “Most airports are government-owned, even when they are privately operated, and that leads to cumbersome processes at best,” he said. “Because we’re a private airport structured as a corporation, we go to a corporate board for approvals and the CEO makes the decisions. The decision process is streamlined and direct, which helps a lot.” Dominican tourism mogul Frank Rainieri is CEO of both the airport management company and the parent company resort.

One example of how things are done at PUJ, said Zemialkowski, was how the airport handled the decision on the future of Terminal Alpha to meet increased demand. While doing a walk-around, Rainieri decided to renovate the terminal



6 PHOTO: SERGE DEJONCKHEERE

Punta Cana’s thatched roofed and breezy open-air terminals celebrate its tropical setting.



7 PHOTO: SERGE DEJONCKHEERE

North America is the largest source of passengers. Here, a Sunwing (WG) Boeing 737-800, is operating a charter flight from Canada.



8 PHOTO: SERGE DEJONCKHEERE

A myriad of international carriers visit Punta Cana, making the destination an attractive place for planespotters.

“WE ARE SUCH A POPULAR DESTINATION THAT, IF DEMAND FROM EUROPE DECREASES, WE FILL THE GAP WITH PASSENGERS FROM NORTH AMERICA AND SOUTH AMERICA.”



PHOTO: PUJ 9

9 Private ownership facilitates construction plans, including a new control tower in 2011.

10 The airport added jet bridges as part of a 2014 upgrade drive.

instead of expanding it, but also ordered the construction of Terminal Bravo. To accommodate the new terminal, the airport would have to move its FBO. Rainieri made his decision in December 2013, the FBO was moved and the area cleared by February 2014, and the official groundbreaking took place in March. Eight months later, in November 2014, Terminal Bravo was open for business.

PUJ's management continues to work closely both with airlines and tour operators to keep the passenger flow growing. North America is the airport's main source of passengers, followed by a variety of European cities. With the political and economic uncertainty occurring in several European countries taking its toll, the airport is working aggressively to maintain its market share among European travelers.

“We want to maintain what we have from Europe and grow it,” said Zemialkowski. To promote itself and the Punta Cana region, the airport appears at routes conferences and hotel and tourism conventions around the world. It also offers incentives for carriers looking to add PUJ to their route networks.

“We are such a popular destination that, if demand from Europe decreases, we fill the gap with passengers from North America and South America,” said Giovanni Rainieri. An increase in arrivals from Brazil, he stated, is currently compensating for a dip in arrivals from Russia. Zemialkowski believes that the secret lies in working closely with tour operators so that they



10 PHOTO: PUJ

FAST FACTS | PUNTA CANA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

IATA: PUJ
ICAO: MDPC

NAME:
Punta Cana International Airport
ADDRESS:
Carretera Higüey-Punta Cana Km. 45. Punta Cana, Dominican Republic

TELEPHONE:
+1 (809) 959-2376
(888) 442-2262

WEBSITE:
www.puntacanainternationalairport.com

PASSENGERS:
6,397,533 (2015)

CARGO MOVEMENTS:
22,946 Tonnes (2015)

OWNERSHIP & OPERATOR:
Corporación Aeroportuaria del Este S.A. (100%)

AIR TRANSPORT MOVEMENTS:
21,197 flights (2015)

ELEVATION:
47 ft. /14.3 m

COORDINATES:
18°34'20.00" N

068°22'00.00" E

COMMUNICATIONS:

ATIS: 132.85
Clearance: 121.65
Ground: 121.9
Apron Coordination: 131.75
Tower: 118.8
Approach: 119.70
Emergency: 121.50

RUNWAY

09-27	10,171 ft. x 147 ft. / 3,100 m. x 45 m.	Asphalt
08-26	10,171 ft. x 147 ft. / 3,100 m. x 45 m.	Asphalt

DESTINATIONS

Aguadilla, Amsterdam, Asunción, Atlanta, Bagotville, Baltimore, Bogotá, Bordeaux, Boston, Brasília, Brussels, Buenos Aires, Calgary, Campinas, Caracas, Charlotte, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Cologne, Columbus, Dallas, Detroit, Düsseldorf, Edmonton, Fort de France, Fort Lauderdale, Frankfurt, Gothenburg, Halifax, Hamburg, Hamilton, Houston, Indianapolis, Lima, Lisbon, London (Ontario), London (UK), Lyons, Madrid, Manchester, Marseille, Miami, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Moncton, Montego Bay, Montreal, Moscow, Munich, Nantes, Nashville, New Orleans, New York, Newark, Orlando, Ottawa, Panama City, Paris, Philadelphia, Point a Pitre, Ponce, Port of Spain, Prague, Quebec City, Quito, Regina, Rio de Janeiro, Rouyn-Noranda, Saint John, San Juan, Santiago, São Paulo, Saskatoon, Sault Sainte Marie, Saint Louis, Stockholm, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Vancouver, Vienna, Warsaw, Washington DC, Windsor, Winnipeg, Zürich

AIRLINES (PASSENGERS)

Avianca Ecuador (AeroGal), Aerolíneas Argentinas, Air Antilles Express, Air Berlin, Air Canada Rouge, Air Europa, Air France, Air Transat, Allegiant, American Airlines, Arkefly, Avianca, Azur, British Airways, Chilejet, Condor, Copa, Copa Colombia, Delta, Edelweiss Air, Eurowings, Evelop, Frontier, Gol, Ikar, InterCaribbean, Jetairfly, JetBlue, LAN Argentina, LAN Chile, LAN Colombia, LAN Peru, Miami Air, Nordwind, Orange Air, Orbest, Orenair, Seaborne, Sky, Southwest, Spirit, Sun Country, Sunwing, Swift Air, TAM, Thomas Cook, Thomas Cook Scandinavia, Thomson, Travel Service, United, Wamos Air, WestJet, White Airways, World Atlantic, XL Airways France, Xtra Airways

AIRLINES (CARGO)

Solar Cargo, Transcarga.

can generate the travel packages that, in turn, create demand for both scheduled and charter flights.

Demand, however, could be temporarily dampened by growing concerns among tourists over the spread of the Zika virus, which has been detected in several Latin American countries, including the Dominican Republic. While PUJ's management did not comment on how the health scare may be impacting its outlook for 2016, the Dominican health authorities have unleashed a nationwide campaign to fumigate potential breeding grounds of the mosquitos that carry the virus.

The potential increase in competition from Cuba, brought about by Washington's continuous easing of travel restrictions to the neighboring island for US travelers, could pose another threat to Punta Cana, though this does not seem to be causing much concern for the airport's management. "Initially, we're not going to see that much of an impact, especially since infrastructure in Cuba still has to be developed," predicted Zemialkowski. Rainieri agreed, noting that "Cuba has been open to the rest of the world for years, but Canadians and Europeans still go to both Cuba and the Dominican Republic."

Zemialkowski is confident that Punta Cana has a strong competitive edge that will continue to bode well for PUJ's outlook. "For some American travelers, Cuba will initially be a novelty," he said. "They'll get a taste of it, but then they'll come back to Punta Cana." 🇩🇲