

AIRLINE in the SUN



Island-hopping by British West Indian Airways

By K. WESTCOTT JONES

TOWARDS the end of last year B.O.A.C.'s active Caribbean subsidiary, British West Indian Airways, celebrated its seventeenth birthday. On that day, November 27, a 48-seater Viscount of B.W.I.A. carried me from Nassau in the Bahamas to Montego Bay, the airport serving Jamaica's booming "Golden North." This was to be the preliminary of a series of island-hopping flights to Grand Cayman, Kingston, San Juan, Antigua, Trinidad, Tobago, Grenada, and Barbados.

This was my fifth visit to the Caribbean. In some ways I can claim to have seen B.W.I.A. grow up, looking at it rather sympathetically every three years or so and noting the big improvements each time. Shortly after the war, cynics in the West Indies used to make play with the airlines' capital letters—calling it "Britain's Worst Investment Abroad". That is no longer the case; the airline has become a household word, regarded not only with affection but with respect. The station manager on each island occupies a position of trust and authority coupled with that of adviser and friend, and the situation is one probably equalled only among the Scottish Hebrides, where B.E.A.'s routes penetrate to backwaters highly dependent upon the air link.

Few people in Europe realize that B.W.I.A.'s 7,000 miles of unduplicated routes serve an area as large as the continent of Europe, yet containing a population of little more than three millions. Taking a B.W.I.A. service from Miami in Florida to Georgetown, British Guiana, via Kingston and Caracas, is equivalent to flying from Gibraltar to Istanbul via London; while a B.W.I.A. flight from Belize, British Honduras, to Trinidad via Kingston and the Antillean Chain involves one in a journey equivalent to Madrid to Moscow via London and Stockholm.

Vikings have been the mainstay of operations since 1947-48. These reliable veterans are now being retired, giving way to a Viscount fleet which (with several DC-3s so recently off the production line that they are all less than nine years old), will comprise the aircraft stock of B.W.I.A. for several years to come. Meanwhile, the Vikings have been bearing the brunt of

A British West Indian Airways Viking about to leave Roberts Field, Grand Cayman, for Belize.

inter-island work, their cabin configuration still the same spacious 28-seat layout that we once appreciated so much on European routes. The forward cabins, admittedly, have been fitted with four abreast seating minus a centre armrest, but the larger rear cabins remain untouched. There is no mixed class, however.

Serving a widely scattered, cosmopolitan community like the British West Indies, the airline's passengers and personnel vary to an amazing degree. On some flights, large negroes with heavy shopping baskets and babies may constitute a majority of the passengers, served with apple juice by a slim English girl with blonde hair. On others, planeloads of white planters forming delegations sit drinking rum brought round by a coal-black stewardess.

Shipping services have diminished to such an extent in the Caribbean that air travel is, to all intents and purposes, the only reliable way of hopping from island to island. Fares are high, reaching as much as 2s a mile on some sectors, but the aeroplane has a monopoly. While the every-six-weeks ship (which may be two weeks late or early) is much cheaper for deck passengers over similar sectors, the cost of accommodation while waiting for it soon eliminates any saving.

Only Dominica, St. Vincent, and the British Virgin Islands are without B.W.I.A. services, but the former two are served by a Grumman Goose of B.G. Airways on permanent charter to the St. Vincent Government. An airstrip has been built—on Beef Island, a promontory of Tortola, leading island of the British Virgin group. As soon as it is opened, the Piper Apaches of Leeward Islands Air Services (which are based on Antigua and connect with B.W.I.A. calls at Coolidge Field) will link this last outpost of the Caribbean by air.

One of the thrice-weekly Viking flights from Montego Bay, Jamaica, brought me to Roberts Field, Grand Cayman, in about 1½ hours. The memory of English gentleman-adventurer Owen Roberts, who pioneered air services to the Cayman Islands with Catalinas of Caribbean International Airways—only to be killed on his inaugural landplane flight—is revered and respected here. Every day, fresh flowers are laid around the large portrait of him in the airport lounge.

Fortunately, B.W.I.A. stepped in after the collapse of Caribbean International, otherwise the Caymans would have reverted to backwater conditions and their new-found prosperity must have vanished. Chief export of the Caymans is their menfolk, who work as seamen on British and American ships, returning to the islands every twelve months. They form a constant market for air transport. Tourism has grown rapidly under the stimulus of regular air services, and four hotels now cater for increasing demand.

L.A.C.S.A., the Costa Rican subsidiary of P.A.A., comes into Grand Cayman three times a week on the way from San Jose to Miami. Two B.W.I.A. flights go on to Belize, capital of British Honduras, while the other terminates in Miami. Roberts Field is often remarkably busy, and on two occasions during the week three aircraft take off within an hour. For a third airline is based on Grand Cayman. This is William L. Bigler's Cayman Brac Airways, Ltd., which flies a scheduled service (and charters) with a Twin Cessna to the Island of Cayman Brac, sixty miles from Roberts Field.

Based as they are at Port of Spain, Trinidad, B.W.I.A. have

The terminal building of the new international airport of San Juan, Puerto Rico, seen beyond the tail of an E.A.L. Constellation.

