



A I R C O M M E R C E

Walk-on to Rio

By the Air Transport Editor

ONE of the most endearing things about the Brazilians is that they never boast about, or marvel at, their own achievements. Take for instance Brasilia, which I was fortunate enough to see on a recent brief visit to the country. In conception, design and execution it must surely rank as one of the wonders of modern civilization. Yet the creators of this work of art do not brag about it, or greedily promote it as a tourist attraction. They have built it because—well, because it was not there, as a Brazilian airline man said. They did it for themselves, to adorn their country, to open up a region of vast untapped mineral and agricultural wealth, to fulfil their pride in being Brazilian, and for no other reasons. It has almost bankrupted them, but they have done it. And while it gives them intense satisfaction, it never occurs to them to boast about it.

So it is with Brazilian air transport. I spent nearly all my all-too-brief visit seeing for myself what I had long believed to exist in Brazil—a professional, competitive airline industry which in some important respects may be considered ahead of Europe, and even of the United States. Where else in the world is there a true no-reservations shuttle service carrying 800,000 passengers a year at 15-minute frequency between two great cities? Where else can you take your choice between a jet or a propeller airliner at 30-40 per cent discount? What other country has a national airline which operates an international DC-7C propeller service at fares 40 per cent below those of its own parallel jet services?

All these things, remarkable to me, are just taken for granted in Brazil. Nobody marvels at them; nobody seems to think how clever Brazil is to have done things that others have found difficult, impossible, or just not worthwhile.

It is easier to write off perfectly good propeller aeroplanes than it is to use them in competition with jets. But you do not see dozens of idle propeller airliners lying around Galeão, Santos Dumont, Congonhas, Viracopos, or Brasilia. Everywhere you look there are aeroplanes being loaded or unloaded, taxiing in, taxiing out—Scandias, Convairs, Viscounts, Electras, and jet Caravelles. Every aeroplane and every terminal bustles with life.

I wanted most of all to see and use the Ponte Aérea, the high-frequency shuttle service operated between Rio and São Paulo by Varig, Cruzeiro and VASP. I met Sr Carlos Ivan Siqueira of Varig, who is the Ponte Aérea superintendent, São Paulo. Mr Charles Bourcier, Sikorsky's technical representative in Brazil, and a regular Ponte Aérea customer, was kind enough to act as interpreter.

Ponte Aérea, meaning Air Bridge, is a consortium of three private companies—VASP, Cruzeiro do Sul and Varig—formed for the purpose of operating services between Brazil's two largest cities, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Some 230 miles separate the airports of these two cities, respectively Congonhas and Santos Dumont. The last-named, the old flying-boat base, is a mere two minutes' drive from down-town Rio.

The Ponte Aérea started in August 1960. The names are in the order VASP, Cruzeiro, Varig because when operations began this was their relative ranking in terms of Rio-São Paulo traffic carried, the ratio actually being about 8:6:3. The route has always been Brazil's busiest, and in fact walk-on services were operating before the three competitive companies decided to unite under the banner Ponte Aérea. Competition was extremely fierce, and REAL, taken over in 1961 by Varig, were a particularly aggressive carrier. "You put on a half-hour frequency and we'll put on a flight every 15 minutes" they used to say. Today the dominant carrier is Varig, operating 60 per cent of the capacity offered with VASP providing 30 per cent and Cruzeiro 10 per cent. All revenues are pooled (at the end of each day) in proportion to capacity offered, regardless of load factor.

The published timetable lists about 70 round-trip flights between the hours of 6 a.m. and 11 p.m., an average frequency of one flight every 15 minutes. This could, if there were no other distractions, be checked by sitting on Copacabana beach, over which a steady stream of Convairs, Scandias and Electras seems to shuttle to and fro all day long, approaching or departing from Santos Dumont.

VASP operate Scandias, which they are now replacing with their Viscount 701s bought from BEA. Cruzeiro fly Convair 440s and 240s, and Varig Convair 240s and Electras. Both Varig and VASP use DC-6Bs on occasion.

The published timetable is flexible. On Fridays, for example, there is a mass exodus from São Paulo, when families and business people leave Brazil's major industrial and commercial city for the beaches of Rio. Frequencies then rise to something like one flight every 10 minutes; and at Brazil's traditional carnival time before Lent, or when there is a big game of *futebol* in Rio or São Paulo, the timetable goes by the board and departures and arrivals occur literally every few minutes.

The fare is Crs5,200 single, which at the present exchange rate is about £3, or just over 3d per mile. Return fares are twice single.

"Flight International" photographs

The ticket desk in the Sao Paulo, Congonhas, terminal. See story starting on this page

