

# TravelWatch - *Isle of Man*

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*Representing and promoting the interests of Isle of Man passengers*

## OPEN SKIES or EMPTY SKIES?      Media Release 21.01.14

After a long period of uncertainty over the Island's air services for this coming summer, TravelWatch IOM is pleased to note that 11 direct routes will operate and that schedules for them all have been published and are now bookable. This contrasts with 20 summer routes which operated only 3 years ago. However it is not just the loss of routes which will concern passengers but also the reduced capacity on many of the remaining routes.

- **LONDON** In summer 2013 capacity to all London airports (Gatwick / London City and Luton) substantially exceeded demand so some reduction in provision was inevitable. This summer flybe will not be flying to Gatwick or Luton, but easyjet will provide up to two Gatwick flights most weekdays but critically no Saturday services for much of July and August. BA are restoring their London City Link to 3 weekday flights, plus one on Saturdays and two on Sundays. This means that London capacity in July will be 48% lower than July 2013 - and that there will only be one London flight on Saturdays in contrast with 6 last year.
- **LIVERPOOL/MANCHESTER** - capacity at Manchester will be slightly increased (3 extra round trips a week) but Liverpool will lose 13 round trips a week, representing a 33% loss in capacity over last summer. Combined capacity to the two airports will be down 17%.
- **BIRMINGHAM** will drop from 12 flights a week to 7 in the peak season with a morning flight from the Island and only a mid-afternoon one from Birmingham, thus eliminating day trip possibilities to the Island and giving unattractive timings for business use from IOM. It also seems that Birmingham frequencies will drop further in the autumn.
- **SCOTLAND** - the return of direct services to Glasgow is welcome, despite the lack of Saturday flights. It is hoped that the reduced capacity will enable viability for Citywing who re-open the route closed last year by Loganair - but there will be no direct services on the Edinburgh route.
- **JERSEY** - some capacity will be available with Citywing who will extend some of their Gloucester flights to Jersey but again this will represent a significant capacity reduction.
- Whilst some of the nine routes we have lost were seasonal, others provided regular convenient means of accessing parts of the UK such as Bristol, Edinburgh and Southampton which were much appreciated by IOM passengers.

### What are the implications of these changes for passengers and what are the alternatives?

1. Passengers will find increased difficulty in booking flights that are **convenient**. Booking ahead will be increasingly necessary to obtain preferred flights.
2. Many destinations will still be available within and beyond UK by changing at Manchester (e.g SW England can be accessed via Manchester to Exeter). Connections can also be made at London City for some European destinations and at Dublin (which avoids UK passenger tax). Given the timings of the reduced schedule to Gatwick these alternative routings will be of increased importance to IOM passengers.

3. Fares are likely to rise as competition is reduced. Fares for the early flight to Liverpool from March 30<sup>th</sup> appear substantially higher than previously. Citylink fares to Gloucester also appear significantly higher than last year. Other Airlines may well follow this lead.
4. The reduction in routes and capacity, coupled with some fare rises, may make **alternative routings** more attractive. Sail and Rail opportunities via the Steam Packet are available to most stations in UK at attractive rates - particularly for railcard holders. There are good rail connections from Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham airports so using a combination of air and rail to reach destinations no longer accessible by air can also be explored.

## **Conclusions:**

With the closure of their base at Ronaldsway the long term future of individual IOM services provided by flybe will be dependent on the economic deployment of their aircraft from their other bases. Their **Manchester** service is important both to them and the Island because it will become the principal route for passengers wishing to fly further afield either for leisure or business purposes. **For that to work the high frequency service to and from the Island needs to be safeguarded and TravelWatch calls on the IOM Government to take steps to ensure this happens.**

TWIOM notes that the **London City** route is now being under-written by Island business interests, and it appears that the NHS Patient Transfer Contract is key to retaining the flybe **Liverpool** and **Birmingham** services (as they are to be operated by the same aircraft). In the short term this is good news but in the longer term these important services look vulnerable.

It is vital that the effect of all these developments is regularly reviewed so that any further changes take into account the needs of IOM passengers as much as those of the off-Island service providers. There is, as yet, no indication how these summer changes will impact on Winter schedules.

## **NOTES FOR EDITORS:**

### **Summary of changes to Air Services from March 30<sup>th</sup> 2014**

1. Loss of Routes: - The following nine routes have been lost in the last 3 years Leeds, East Midlands, Oxford, Norwich, Southampton, Bristol, Luton, Edinburgh and Anglesey.
2. Loss of Capacity: - Capacity on the following five routes has been reduced by over 30% with the withdrawal of an operator and/or a reduction of services – Gatwick, Liverpool, Birmingham, Jersey and the Scottish Services. This means a reduction in the convenience and frequency for passengers
3. Slightly improved capacity, convenience and frequency is being provided on the Manchester route with 5 flights daily.
4. Capacity, frequency and convenience unchanged: The London City route will revert to the 2013 schedule with a plane night-stopping on the Island.

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