

[Back to home page](#) [Back to articles](#)

The central issue - Routes News September 2013

Central American countries are keen to grow their slice of the European tourism pie, but more direct air services look to be a long way off, writes Mark Smulian

Many destinations in Central America have targeted tourism as a growth priority, but direct air services from Europe remain few and far between.

Plenty of visitors already arrive from North America, but the European tourist market is small, and under continued pressure due to depressed economies. The small market from Europe is reflected in the fact that there are relatively few direct flights to Central American countries, which forces most European tourists to fly via the United States which requires a visa or an ESTA and frequently involves the notorious bottleneck of Miami airport.

Costa Rica and Panama promote themselves mostly as wildlife, ecological and coastal destinations and according to the World Travel and Tourism Council in 2012 visitors spent US\$5.5 billion in Costa Rica and US\$3.3 billion in Panama. Meanwhile Guatemala saw US\$4.1 billion spent in 2012 while, tourists contributed US\$2.6bn to Honduras in 2011.

According to the Panama Tourism Authority, 796,700 tourists arrived in the first quarter of 2012, a 4% increase on the same period in 2011. Of these, 514,862 entered via Tocumen International Airport, with most of the rest being cruise ship passengers. Europeans made up 51,086 of the first quarter total, so in rough terms some 200,000 in a year, with Germany being the main market.

Panama's tourism board has stated it hopes to increase the number of routes into the country in order to boost visitor numbers further. Currently, Panama has links on 27 carriers to 59 destinations in 24 countries – most are in North or South America but there are also daily flights to Amsterdam with KLM, and five services a week to Madrid on Iberia.

Costa Rica's annual tourism statistics for 2012 shows it received 2.34 million visitors, of whom 284,996 came from Europe, again with Germany the largest single source market. The main Juan Santamaria Airport saw 1.2 million international arrivals in 2012, with 212,759 from Europe.

Both Costa Rica and Panama promote themselves as ecological and winter sun destinations and they have Atlantic and Pacific coastlines with beach resorts on both.

Although short on the archaeological treasures found in Mexico and Guatemala, the two countries seek to make up for this with natural wonders.

Costa Rica in particular markets itself as a place to see wildlife and rain forests, including green tortoises nesting grounds along the beaches of Tortugero National Park and bird and turtle observation on the Caribbean coast. The Pacific coast offers beaches, viewing of whales and dolphins fishing and the Corcovado National Park, which boasts that within its boundaries 2.5% of the planet's biodiversity can be found within its boundaries.

Panama also offers a number of national parks and for the more intrepid visitors the chance to explore parts of the Darien jungle, an area so impenetrable that it is still to 'missing link' in the Panamerican Highway. There are also historic areas of Panama City to explore and trips through the Panama Canal are popular.

While European air links are few and far between, within South and Central America air travel is booming, with Avianca Taca reporting growth in the first half of this year. The airline carried nearly 12 million passengers, a 9.3% increase over the same period in 2012. Of these, more than half flew in Colombia, Peru and Ecuador and the remainder on flights to destinations outside these countries.

From Europe Iberia offers the most flights to Central America at 16 per week, including daily flights to San Jose, Costa Rica, five weekly services to Panama and four flights to Guatemala and El Salvador. The embattled carrier's network is being reshaped and long-haul routes are in the firing line, which could potentially leave some routes for other carriers to pick up, as Air Europa has already done with some South American links such as Montevideo. Iberia also codeshares with Avianca Taca, which covers other regional destinations.

With Iberia facing its battles, Spain's Air Europa is attempting to position itself to become the leading operator from Europe to Latin America from its Madrid hub. Some 30% of Air Europa's passengers through Barajas Terminal 1 are intercontinental transfers to South America from its European feeder routes from Gatwick, Paris Charles de Gaulle and Orly, Amsterdam, Rome and Brussels.

Air Europa's UK general manager Colin Stewart told Routes News: "Central America is not on our system yet, we would do it but we need opportunities. Montevideo was there because Iberia was pulling out, so there may be routes that become opportunities like that.

"We would look for one or two new flights over the next year, so who knows? There have got to be commercial reasons for any flight and we'd need to know the level of government support available, and how many passengers we could expect originating there, rather than just those flying back to Europe," he adds.

While Air Europa doesn't yet have any Central American points, Germany's carrier

Condor flies direct to Costa Rica and reports the route is performing strongly. Its spokesman Johannes Winter says: “The comfort of flying non-stop is high and our three booking classes give a broad choice to the costumer.”

The Miami connection

The lack of direct flights from Europe to Central American cities means that many tourists have little choice but to transit through Miami airport, which is well-documented as being one of the most tricky US transfer points.

Even Florida’s state governor Rick Scott has complained about the way the US federal government staffs Miami. In a public letter to homeland security secretary Janet Napolitano, Scott said: “I would like to bring to your attention a serious situation concerning US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) staffing at MIA, which has the potential to damage Florida’s image and international business competitiveness.”

Scott said the airport had in 2012 invested \$180 million in a new Federal Inspection Services facility for customs and passports, with the intention of improving passengers’ experience but despite this, “passport control lanes [are] not being adequately staffed”.

More than 1,000 passengers a day missed onward connections as a result, Governor Scott added.

However, if anything, things have got worse following federal spending cuts in March.

An MIA spokesman told Routes News: “Since then CBP overtime has been greatly reduced. This has resulted in long wait times for processing during peak periods.” MIA has even sought permission to pay CBP officers’ overtime itself, and is exploring the use of self-service kiosks.

It seems like faster transits through Miami are not going to happen any time soon, and more direct flights from Europe to Central American destinations remain a long way off too.