

# Flights to Jamaica secure

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TOURISM interests are optimistic that American Airlines will not cut its 52 weekly flights into Jamaica despite yesterday's announcement that the airline and its parent company, AMR, were bankrupt.

Jamaica signed a controversial US\$4.5-million (\$385-million) airlift-guarantee deal in 2008 which provided an incentive for the US carrier to keep flying to the island from three American gateways.

Tourism Minister Edmund Bartlett defended the deal at the time, saying the Caribbean was one of the regions marked by American Airlines for reduction in air service in September of that year.

Director of Tourism John Lynch said yesterday that Jamaica does not expect the airline to back away from the deal. "We have not had any indication from American Airlines of any flight reduction at this time and so we are not expecting any cancellation in bookings," he told the Business Observer.

American Airlines currently operates three daily flights out of Miami into Kingston and three into Montego Bay, plus five flights a week each from Chicago and Dallas.

Lynch said there were a lot of forward bookings for the winter tourism season which begins on December 15 and there is no expectations that these will be cancelled.

The decision to file for Chapter 11 protection should not cause significant alarm, he said. "All major carriers have gone into Chapter 11 to adjust cost and bring it down and since (American) had the highest operating cost the decision had to be taken," he said.

However, Evelyn Smith, president of the Jamaica Hotel and Tourist Association (JHTA), said: "It is important that both public and private sector interests monitor the situation."

She also worried whether any other airline would be able to fill the gap if American did cut flights to the island.

"We will be in touch with our overseas partners to see if bookings are being cancelled even as we raise the tough question of whether we have enough seats on the other carriers into the island," she said.

Ian Burns, CEO of REDjet, said that if American did reduce its flights, his company would try to take up the slack.

"The opportunity for REDjet is good as our licence also allows us to fly to the States," he said yesterday.

The bigger airline's woes are a sign that its old fashioned business model doesn't work any more, he added.

"The future lies with smaller, private companies like REDjet," he said. "Similarly we've seen Air Jamaica and Caribbean Airlines struggle because they have tried to follow that type of model."

Martha Pantín, American's regional spokeswoman, said that the airline cannot speculate as to any future decisions. "Our customers will see no immediate change as a result of the filing, and can be confident that they can continue depending on us," she said.

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Elizabeth Brown-Scotton, chief commercial officer of MJB Airports Ltd, which operates the Sangster International Airport in Montego Bay, said the airport is not expecting any major changes. “MJB is not expecting nor have we been notified of any operational changes. It is business as usual.”

With additional reporting by Paul Allen