



# How to fly to Paradise

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**ST. BARTHS -** While in the Caribbean, I sat down with Steven Kong, Managing Director of TLC-Aviation, the executive handling operation of choice on St. Maarten. We talked about St. Barths, the exclusive destination of the "Rich and Famous". St. Barths is short for the official name 'Territorial Collectivity of Saint-Barthélemy'.

It is part of the French Republic and therefore French-speaking and French-flavored. Celebrities and luminaries have long flocked to this high-end, luxury isle for its privacy and exclusivity. Although it has a reputation of being a chic getaway, the international crowd enjoys the combination of low-key European sophistication and Caribbean laid-back lifestyle. How do private jets get there? They don't! St. Barths does have an airport (SBH-TFFJ), but the too-short 650 m/2,133 ft

runway is furthermore listed as one of the most difficult approaches in the world and not something for the faint-hearted.

*"The principal gateway to the island is through St. Maarten's International Airport, where also the scheduled flights arrive daily from both the USA and Europe,"* explains Steve Kong in his office at Princes Juliana Airport. The TLC-Aviation people are easy to recognize at various business aviation conferences; they wear a bright orange shirt which is almost a trade mark.

*"Every year we attend EBACE. Whenever we introduce ourselves, before we know it, we get the question 'How do we get to St. Barths?' as if they are asking for 'How can we get to Paradise?' Private jets of any size land here in St. Maarten. We do get a lot of assignments from major European and Russian charter operators. In many cases the passengers have a private yachts waiting to bring them to St. Barths, or cruise to the various islands. For those who don't have a yacht, we provide a seamless transfer to a charter flight of ten minutes with a Twin Otter, Cessna Caravan or Britten-Norman Islander. Those are about as big as an airplane that can land there. But also for the yacht owners and passengers, we provide a smooth transition from airport to harbor through our subsidiary called "Seagrapes", a yacht support and concierge service provider. So, we're a one-stop-shop-service for Jetting and Yachting, which is something seldom heard of in FBO circles"*

During the winter months, mostly Hollywood stars and producers as well as Russian oligarchs and their following of friends and business partners visit the island. They stay in boutique hotels and resorts of about 12 units and pay US\$ 8,000 per night for luxury accommodations and outstanding personal services.

On the eve of New Year's Eve, the local yacht registry of St. Barth's harbor usually records about 130 vessels. Fifteen to twenty of them may be in the mega-yacht category of 60 m/ 200 ft or longer. Too big for the harbor, they are anchored in the azure waters of the bay in front of the rustic port Gustavia with the brick-red roofed villas dotted in the surrounding hills. Local fishing boats sit happily next to the super yachts. In the midst of this luxury flotilla at the anchorage is the ultimate show-off in the exclusive fraternity of the super-rich, the world's largest yacht, the 164 m/ 538 ft 'Eclipse'. The owner, Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich is a St. Barths regular and owns a 70 acre estate there.

Le Yacht Club is the place to *"see and been seen"* filled with moguls, luminaries, models, and general genetically-blessed types. The club, set back high at the top of the harbor, is a supper club cum nightclub, with spacious lounging areas and private tables by a sleek dance floor overlooking the mega- yachts. A great place for a bit high level

*chitchat like "this yacht is bigger than the other yacht" and, "this entourage is better looking than the other's entourage."*

*"The same clientele makes several trips per year to our region. Usually, the mega-yachts sail to the Caribbean long before the owners and passengers arrive by plane. So, much of the provisioning is done here," continues Steve. "The yachts and their crews will be all set and ready to sail. But, for perfect timing and making the best impression to its owners, a captain of the yacht wants to know at exactly what time the jet is coming in. And so, he calls us. He can count on us to get the most updated airport traffic information when plane and passengers are arriving. Although St. Barths is synonymous with Caribbean elegance and chic, our airport of St. Maarten (SXM/TNCM) is the most popular and convenient option for travelling to what is reputed for being a tropical sophisticated paradise and a mixture of all that is best in the Caribbean."*

What makes landing at St. Barths airport such a thrill? Someone explained it as follows: 'To land there, pilots, unaided by electronic landing guidance, must make a steep, slow glide, thread their way between a pair of wind-buffed peaks, skim 150 feet down a hill while holding a 10-foot altitude, then level, touch down and brake hard.' In other words, they have to fly through a notch between the peaks of the relatively high Mont Tourment hill.

The pilot has to work the yoke violently trying to keep level in the pretty strong winds and it creates turbulence. The small and short airstrip ends directly on the beach. All in all, it is pretty exciting. Watching the planes land from the top of the hill where four roads between the twin peaks meet in a roundabout is almost as exciting as being a passenger on the aircraft itself.

The planes come in nose down, diving directly at whatever drives or whoever walks there. It can clear it by about 10 feet before the steep descend over a hill to make the landing. St. Barths has one of those airports where a landing will make one's hair rise and gives one the goose bumps.

**by Cdr. Bud Slabbaert**