

When competition among inter-island flights is fierce, it takes a stand-out competitor to break the mould. **Matteo Legnani** discovers how locally based Mokulele Airlines is using nature as an alternative approach.

A View

Worth a Thousand Words...

The Hawaiian archipelago is known worldwide for its pristine beaches and imposing volcanoes set in the stunning backdrop of the Pacific Ocean. The youngest of the 50 US states, it covers an area of 10,900sq miles (28,113km²) – roughly the same size as Belgium. Made up of eight main islands along with a scattering of smaller ones, reliance on air travel is deemed a necessity for tourists and locals alike. As airline

competition thrives in the state, one distance itself from the pack through its 'experience'. Enter Mokulele Airlines, a commuter firm based in Kona, Hawaii ('The Big Island').

Ambitions Arise

The story of the company began in 1994 when a young entrepreneur named Rebecca 'Kawehi' Inaba founded Mokulele Flight Services. This was a pioneering moment for the island-chain as it was the first carrier

to be formed by a Hawaiian woman. Her strong passion for aviation was ignited following her father's career as an Aloha Airlines pilot. The name 'Mokulele' was chosen as it comes from a combination of Hawaiian words with 'moku' translating as 'island' and 'lele' meaning 'hop', thus island hop.

The small firm initially operated a trio of Piper Navajo Chieftains for charter and sightseeing flights to demonstrate the sheer beauty of

Spectacular scenery as described by the Mokulele CEO proved to be popular with customers. ALL IMAGES COURTESY MOKULELE AIRLINES



Hawaii National Park. Small-scale tourist operations remained the core focus of Mokulele for more than a decade until change was swiftly implemented.

In 2005 a new chapter opened when former baggage handler turned entrepreneur, William "Bill" Boyer Jr bought a majority stake. As a new leader at the helm, one of his first priorities was to phase out the Chieftains in favour of nine-seat

Cessna Grand Caravans. Boyer Jr's ambitions of transitioning the once small-time charter into a fledgling commuter operator gained significant traction when he reached an agreement with Mesa Air Group's go division to start scheduled inter-island rotations. The first of these began with a link between two destinations on the island of Maui between Kapalua and Kahului, before the former was also linked with Honolulu on O'ahu.



TOP LEFT - A long view of Kapalua following disembarkation.

TOP LEFT - For Mokulele rotations, ending at the gate essentially means standing outside by the Airstair prior to boarding.

TOP LEFT - The author's wife, Cesena Grand Caravan, N585MA (c/n 17000133), flew between Kona, Hawaii and Honolulu.

TOP RIGHT - The terminal at Kapalua is small but offers a selection of amenities.

Mokulele Airline's Hawaiian route network.

Consequently, the newly established commuter grew its network rapidly and by 2008, following a deal with Republic Airways, the Mokulele brand even appeared on the fuselage of jet aircraft. The pair of Embraer E170s, N869RW (c/n 17000133) and N870RW (c/n 17000138), were operated by Shuttle America between Honolulu, Lihoe and Kona, although this was short-lived and one year later Republic assumed control of the airline, only to surrender it back to the Mesa Air Group a few months later.

Following this turbulent period, Mokulele eventually gained a foothold after Mesa sold it to Scottsdale, Arizona-based Transpac Aviation in 2011. Older Grand Caravan 208Bs were gradually substituted by factory-delivered 206GX models featuring a Garmin 1000 glass cockpit instrument panel.

Buoyed by relative stability, new destinations were added to the network – many of these were operated under the Essential Air Service (EAS) banner. Frequencies increased to the point that in 2014, it operated a total of 117 inter-island flights per day.

Just over two years later marked Mokulele Airline's entry into the United States mainland, albeit on a single EAS-funded link between Los Angeles International and Imperial County airport located 90 miles (145km) directly east of San Diego on the border with Mexico.

Acquisitions Aboard

Fast forward three years and yet another acquisition was on the cards. On February 8, 2019, Mississippi-based Southern Airways Express purchased Mokulele from Transpac making it the largest commuter airline group in the US States with almost 1,400 flights per week. Today (and prior to the COVID-19 outbreak) Mokulele's operations make up 850 of the total rotations using a fleet of 16 Grand Caravan 206Xs to nine destinations, more than any of its competitors.

Speaking to *Airline World*, Keith Sisson, Southern's co-founder and chief marketing officer, explained what advantages the latest commitment offered: "[With] our travellers [being] 50% local and 50% visitors, we point at increasing the numbers relative to Hawaiian residents, particularly of those who commute between the islands for business reasons, by adding capacity on certain routes."

It recently introduced corporate travel cards ranging between US\$1,000 and US\$2,000 – a higher value equates to a bigger discount with 5% for a US\$1,000 pre-paid card and 15% up to US\$2,000. In addition, the Hawaiian firm offers its 'I'm' Loa frequent flyer programme for returning customers.

After Southern bought its stake in the



Stan Little, current chairman and CEO, poses alongside Mokulele founder William 'Bill' Boyer Jr.

brand, Mokulele acquired a new leader in the form of Stan Little. *Airline World* sat down with the Mokulele/Southern chairman and CEO to discuss route and expansion plans. He said that a couple of months after buying the company, a daily service was added from Kahului to Lanai's Kītyi. "We are the only airline to operate this route and it is giving just excellent results with most flights sold out."

"But I think we are already serving all the Hawaiian airports that are practical for us to fly into. We had considered Hilo (120 miles [194km] away on 'The Big Island'), but it's too far from Kahului to be economically viable for us. Regarding Kauai (the

only major island in Hawaii not served by Mokulele), it is slightly too far over water for the Caravan, so we would have to add a twin-engine aircraft to our fleet in order to fly there. I would say that, in the grand scheme of things, we probably won't deviate from our model."

Competition Challenge

The deal in February of last year was perhaps overshadowed by the arrival of low-cost giant Southwest Airlines. While the Dallas-based company launched links between the mainland and Hawaii, the critical factor was that it started its own inter-island flights. The inaugural 'island hopping' >>



rotation began in March of that year between Honolulu and Kahului with one-way introductory fares being as low as \$29. The firm is famous for its "Southwest effect," which aims to stimulate the market while averaging lower prices. In response to this new major competitor, Little admitted:

"Southwest has had an effect on the inter-island market. Their ticket fares are lower than our actual seat cost on most routes, so there is no chance that we'll be matching it."

"But I have to say that our customers appreciate the frequency we provide on most routes, like the Kona-Maui service that we run 12 times per day. Southwest runs only once and Hawaiian [Airline] three," he stated.

Importantly, what Little highlighted as a major draw for passengers in comparison to its rival are the unique experiences offered by Mokulele as he asserted: "The ease and convenience of our private terminals, and certainly the views that our customers enjoy from flying at 5,000 feet instead of 30,000 feet. I personally enjoy the whole watching on the flight from Kahului to Molokai, a thing you aren't going to get from a [flying] 737."

The famous Diamond Head crater is a prominent feature of the Mokulele flight.

The Mokulele Experience

Considering his comments, it is only natural to experience what Mokulele has to offer first-hand. The author's journey began at Kona/Elliott Opaoka Airport – named in honour of the Kona native astronaut killed in the 1986 Challenger Space Shuttle disaster – for a trip to the paradise of Honolulu. On a glorious sunny day, I arrived at the facility 30 minutes before my 11:55am departure via Kapulu on the island of Molokai.

I bypassed the main passenger terminal in favour for the small commuter-dedicated facility. The open-air building houses a single Mokulele check-in desk. The agent welcomed me and asked for my body and bag weight. After checking my ID and confirming the passenger manifest, she told me to take a seat and wait for her to call for boarding. Simply put it, relaxation was emphasised with no queues and no TSA security.

Ten minutes before departure, the seven passengers bound for Kapulu were accompanied to the single gate outside (basically a door in the airport boundary fence). We were called by

couples and each assigned a row of seats on the turboprop. Mokulele's Grand Caravans feature four rows of pearl-coloured, leather-covered seats. Towards the back the cabin is closed by a single large seat, more like a bench, seating nine passengers. Seatbelts are car-like, with a diagonal strap crossing the chest and there are lifejackets and safety cards positioned in the seat pockets. Occupants on the type are afforded fantastic all-round views owing to its high wing design.

During the author's trip two captains were flying our sled, N856MA (c/n 2088-3084), with Bjorn Nilsson in the first officer position while Mackenzie Sowers sat in the commander's seat. With Nilsson performing the safety briefing, Sowers fired-up the Pratt & Whitney Canada P750A-134A and taxed us to Kona's Runway 17. With a light load, the aircraft entered the 11,000ft (3,352m) strip halfway before becoming airborne just 18 seconds later for the 45-minute link.

As soon as we took to the air the crystal blue sea became prominent on the left while the spectacular 13,796ft (4,205m) Mauna Kea volcano became dominant on the right – interestingly

if you measured the height from top to its base under water it is the tallest mountain in the world surpassing Mount Everest. With a cruise altitude of 9,000ft, other mountains were easily seen including the 10,023ft (3,055m) Haleakala volcano with white domes from the observatory telescopes perched upon it.

Averaging a speed of 160kts it took just 20 minutes to reach the southern shores of Maui. With the Caravan having started its descent I easily spotted coral reefs, pristine beaches, lush vegetation and lava beds before arriving over luxurious resorts that characterise the northwestern part of the island.

Once descended through 5,000ft we flew downwind-west of the airfield before making a right 180° turn to align with Kapulu's Runway 20. The airport approach is often synchroscopic with bumpy conditions as the winds are affected from the high terrain. We touched down firmly at 12:42pm before parking next to an Ohana by Hawaiian ATR 42 turboprop.

On the ground, once the six passengers departed I had a 20-minute wait in the airport before

The Grand Grand Caravan size and other passengers.

Mokulele Airline's fleet is part of the Grand Caravan.



heading to Oahu. But before I left, Nilsson started washing the passenger windows, demonstrating how important the stunning view is for the airline's success, declaring "We do it at least once a day". In the meantime, Kapulu's terminal is rather small but offered me a sports and snack bar, a shop and a basic seating area.

Honolulu Bound

For the next leg I was joined by eight passengers and the procedure was identical to that in Kona. I boarded the same Caravan that I just disembarked, but this time I was assigned the single seat at the back (the 'bench') giving me better access to move from side to side depending on the view.

A 50-minute flight time was expected, which would take us to the north of Molokai Island, along the famous cliffs that were the setting for the popular *Magnum* TV television series during the 1980s. After departure we climbed initially to 5,000ft, but the flight crew took us down to 1,000ft to the southeast of Molokai to admire the lush green, vertical-stoop cliffs. Doing 120kts, the ride was very bumpy, but those

three minutes of up-close panorama were unforgettable.

Next, Nilsson announced we were about to overfly the remote peninsula of Kahupapa, famous for the site of its leper colony founded in 1875 – the facility housed 1,200-1,300 patients at its peak. Just eight patients remain there today. The lighthouse and what appeared to be several cemeteries made for a rather melancholic, though impressive, view.

This particular link generally follows the same routing, but Nilsson explained that during winter months a detour to the south is made to intercept the shoals of whales that migrate to warmer waters – it's even been noted that individual whales and their associated water spurts can be seen if low enough.

After leaving the peninsula, our aircraft climbed to 9,000ft and the view became less impressive for the next half an hour. Nearing arrival to Hawaii's largest city, we were greeted to a view of skyscrapers, five-star hotels and busy beaches. We flew nose down over Diamond Head – a beautiful volcanic crater located just a few miles from the famous Waikiki. »



Southwest Airlines entry into the Hawaiian market has posed a risk with its cheap fares and Boeing 737s. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/JOHNNYWS

beach – before levelling off at 2,000ft to the north of the city.

As we skirted the eastern boundary of Honolulu International, we crossed over the terminal and Runway 08L/26R before banking almost 180° to make a perfect landing on the 6,952ft (2,120m) Runway 04L – the shortest among the four active runways used by a mix of commuter and general aviation types.

Depending on traffic, flight times can be reduced on approach to Honolulu if shortcuts are approved by air traffic control, as Sowers described: "We normally proceed downwind on the north side of the airport until reaching Pearl Harbor, before [we] veer [off] to align with 04L or 04R. But when there is no traffic coming in to 08L, [we are permitted to] cut through

[which] shortens flight times [by] four to five minutes."

After disembarking from the Caravan, I arrive in Honolulu's Terminal 3 (T3) – the facility is Mokulele's main operational base in the island-chain. Inaugurated in May 2018 for the carrier's exclusive use, it is situated approximately half a mile (0.8km) east of the main terminal complex. The wooden-built, open-air structure, measures 4,300sq ft (400m²) on a single floor, providing passengers with two check-in desks, restrooms and vending machines, but no shops or bar.

T3 is connected every five minutes to the main terminal area by the WikiWiki shuttle (Wiki translating as fast or quick). Following the purchase of Mokulele by the Southern group,

interline agreements have become established with American Airlines and Alaska Airlines. However, unlike conventional connecting flights where luggage is moved between aircraft by baggage handlers, passengers must retrieve their own luggage after arrival from the US mainland.

Size Doesn't Matter

In recent years, while ownership of Mokulele Airlines has changed and an established rival has broken into its market, it strives to offer a service found nowhere else. Its convenient schedules, small open-air terminals and all-round Hawaiian hospitality make this a popular option for tourists and locals.

While Mokulele cannot match the low fares or fast and expensive jets, it makes up for it with the experience of superb in-flight views. To use the words of one of the Mokulele pilots upon landing: "Dedicated air tours are the best way to discover the wonders of Hawaii from the sky, what you can see during our regular scheduled flights is not far from it." **EW**

The author wishes to thank Keith Sisson for his help with this article.

The author's flight flew directly above Honolulu International giving spectacular views.




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Island-hopping in Hawaii