ELEVATING NEVIS: PREMIER MARK BRANTLEY ON AVIATION, TOURISM AND ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

News / Airlines, Business aviation, Finance

Few infrastructure projects have the potential to reshape an island's future quite like the ongoing transformation of Nevis Airport. To gain deeper insight into this ambitious development and the vision behind it, I had the pleasure of speaking with Hon. Mark Brantley, Premier of Nevis. Our wide-ranging and insightful conversation explored the airport expansion project, the role of business aviation, regional connectivity, sustainable tourism and the opportunities this investment could create for both Nevis and the wider Caribbean. It is a pleasure to share the key highlights of our discussion with our readers. As this transformative project continues to take shape, 50SkyShades will be closely following its progress and reporting on the milestones that will help define the next chapter of aviation and economic development in Nevis.

T.O.: Many people who have never attended CaribAvia struggle to place the Caribbean islands on a map, let alone understand the unique role each one plays in the region's development. I want our readers to understand what each island is building, where

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opportunities lie, and why some of these destinations could become increasingly important over the next 20 or 30 years. If we don't tell those stories, people will never fully appreciate the region. So let me start with the airport development. If I'm not mistaken, construction officially began on July 1. How would you describe the project's progress so far?

M.B.: The project is extremely significant for Nevis. We may be a small island of just 13,500 residents, but our ambitions are much larger than our size. Our goal is to make Nevis more accessible to the world while remaining true to our identity. Our tourism model has always been low impact and high yield. We are not a mass-tourism destination. Instead, we cater to discerning travelers seeking privacy, authenticity and luxury. In that regard, we share similarities with destinations such as Anguilla and St. Barts, although each offers its own unique experience.

One thing we recognized is that many of our visitors travel privately. Some own homes and villas on Nevis and would prefer to fly directly to the island. Unfortunately, our airport infrastructure had not seen major improvements in more than 25 years, and it had become clear that significant investment was needed. The expansion project is designed to create a world-class private aviation gateway that will serve Nevis for decades to come.

This is a source of tremendous pride for both the government and the people of Nevis. It also positions the island to play a greater role within the wider Caribbean aviation ecosystem, particularly through stronger connections with destinations such as St. Barts.

T.O.:Have you shared this part of Nevis' history before? When you mentioned Alexander Hamilton, I have to confess that my youngest daughter is a huge fan. She's studying American history and knows everything about Alexander Hamilton. She even sings the songs. When I tell her where he was actually born, she's going to be amazed.

M.B. It's a wonderful piece of trivia. In fact, let me tell you a funny story.A few years ago, I went to see *Hamilton* at the Richard Rodgers Theatre in Manhattan. Lin-Manuel Miranda had actually spent several months in Nevis researching and preparing the musical. It was incredibly difficult to get tickets in those early days because the show was such a phenomenon. I went with one goal in mind: I wanted to hear the word "Nevis" mentioned on stage because, of course, Alexander Hamilton was born here. But to my surprise, when that part of the story came up, they referred to his birthplace as "a forgotten place in the Caribbean."

T.O. What?

M.B.: Exactly. I almost wanted to raise my hand from the back of the theatre and say, "No, we're still here. We're very much here. We haven't been forgotten." It's a funny story, but yes, Hamilton was born in Nevis. We have a museum dedicated to him, and the house where he was born has been carefully preserved.

Nevis has a remarkably rich history. Hamilton himself is credited with helping design the U.S. financial system. He founded the Bank of New York, helped establish the U.S. Coast Guard and played a significant role in shaping the early United States. Naturally, we feel a strong historical connection to his legacy.

More broadly, Nevis offers the kind of history and culture that resonate with the type of visitor we attract. If you're looking for casinos, nightlife and nonstop entertainment, Nevis probably isn't the destination for you.

Nevis is where you come to step away from the intensity of modern life. It's a place to reconnect

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with yourself, spend meaningful time with your family and simply recharge. We offer great food, excellent wine and a kind of understated, barefoot elegance that appeals to a discerning traveler.

I've often said, and not in any arrogant sense, that Nevis is not for everyone. Not everyone will be drawn to what we offer. But that also reflects our commitment to protecting what makes this island special.

Our environment is incredibly important to us. While other destinations pursue ever-increasing visitor numbers, that has never been our model. We remain committed to a low-impact, high-yield approach. We want visitors who truly appreciate the island, its culture and its character.

In many ways, Nevis has chosen its own path. We have a unique spirit, a unique identity and a unique sense of place. In today's world, those qualities are becoming increasingly rare. Through our airport development and broader investments, we are creating the infrastructure needed to attract travelers who value exactly those things.

T.O.: An airport expansion of this scale represents a major investment. It will create opportunities for local businesses, involve international partners and reshape the island's infrastructure. Even though the project is still in its early stages, are you already beginning to see its impact on Nevis?

M.B.: It's still very early because the groundbreaking ceremony itself was largely symbolic, as these events often are. But the contractors have indicated they can complete the new runway infrastructure within approximately 40 weeks. A significant amount of equipment has already been mobilized, and the work is moving forward at full pace.

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If everything stays on schedule, our goal is to be welcoming new aircraft within the next 12 to 14 months. The upgraded airport will include parking for up to 50 private jets, a brand-new first-class FBO and substantial improvements to our control tower and emergency response capabilities.

Every aspect of this project has been carefully considered. It has taken years of planning, consultation and preparation. We had to develop the concept, complete the design work, engage with the community through town hall meetings and, of course, secure the necessary funding.

T.O.: That brings me perfectly to my next question. How did you finance a project of this magnitude?

M.B.: We're approaching the project in two parts. The first involves the airside infrastructure, including the runway itself, its length and strength, runway lighting, fuel facilities, a new hangar and other aviation-related improvements. That part of the project is being financed through a partnership with Patrick Drahi, a resident of Nevis and private aircraft owner who has agreed to support the initiative financially.

The second component focuses on supporting infrastructure, including road relocations, drainage works and related improvements. That portion is being funded through facilities provided by the Government of Taiwan. In essence, we're bringing together private-sector investment on one side and government-to-government cooperation on the other. We believe this combination gives us the best opportunity to deliver a project that the entire island can be proud of, while also creating benefits for our regional partners, including our friends in St. Barts.

T.O.:Having attended several CaribAvia conferences over the years, I've noticed that regional cooperation is one of the topics that comes up every single time.

Yet despite all the discussions, goodwill and willingness to collaborate, I still struggle to point to many concrete outcomes. People want to cooperate. They want to talk. But tangible results often seem elusive. Why do you think that is?

M.B.: Unfortunately, the Caribbean doesn't yet have enough of the institutional architecture needed to make regional cooperation as effective as it could be.When I talk about architecture, I'm referring to the frameworks, protocols and regulations that allow English-speaking, French-speaking, Dutch-speaking and Spanish-speaking territories to work together efficiently.

The Caribbean is an extremely diverse region. We have French territories such as Guadeloupe, Martinique and St. Barts. We have Dutch territories such as Sint Maarten, Saba and Statia. We have British Overseas Territories, including Anguilla, Montserrat, the British Virgin Islands, Turks and Caicos and the Cayman Islands. Then we have independent nations, each with its own regulatory environment.

Even within aviation, the regulatory landscape varies significantly. Some countries operate under shared structures, such as the Eastern Caribbean Civil Aviation Authority, while others maintain entirely separate systems. As a result, something that appears very logical on paper can become surprisingly complicated in reality.

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Take Nevis and St. Barts as an example. We are only 12 to 14 minutes apart by light aircraft. The same travelers often visit both destinations. Someone staying in Nevis might want to spend the day in St. Barts, while someone vacationing in St. Barts may want to come here for golf or other experiences.

Yet because of regulatory requirements and operational structures, a journey that should take 12 minutes can easily turn into a 45-minute or one-hour trip involving multiple stops.

That simply doesn't make sense.

Another challenge is continuity. Relationships often advance because individual leaders share a common vision. I've developed a strong relationship with President Ladé in St. Barts, for example. But political leadership changes. Priorities evolve. New administrations face different challenges.

What one leader considers a priority may not be viewed the same way by the next.That is why continuity is so important. Without it, we risk having exactly the same conversation 40 years from now and still asking why the Caribbean isn't doing more together.

T.O.: With the scale of your airport development, do you envision the need for a dedicated training center? Expanding the airport and introducing new services, particularly for business aviation, will require a larger pool of skilled professionals. Where do you see that talent coming from?

M.B.: Initially, we will probably need to bring in some external talent, and I think that's simply a reality for a project of this scale.Nevis already has an airport, and we already have aviation expertise on the island. In addition, our close proximity to St. Kitts, which is home to the Robert L. Bradshaw International Airport, gives us access to a broader pool of regional experience and knowledge. We also expect to draw on expertise from regional and international aviation organizations, including ICAO and the Eastern Caribbean Civil Aviation Authority.

At the same time, we see this development as an opportunity to encourage our own people to come home. Many Nevisians are currently working in aviation and related industries across the world. We are proud of what they have achieved, but it is also true that we have experienced a degree of brain drain over the years. Some of our most talented people have built successful careers abroad.

One of the goals of this project is to create opportunities that encourage them to return. We need our people here. We need their skills, experience and contributions if we are to continue developing as a nation. That said, I completely agree that strengthening our local capabilities will be essential. In fact, we have already begun investing in that future. We are providing scholarships for young people interested in careers such as air traffic control and other aviation-related professions. Those initiatives are already underway and form part of our long-term strategy for building a sustainable aviation workforce in Nevis.

T.O.:One of my final questions brings me back to an event that I have been proudly supporting for many years: CaribAvia. If the organizers were interested in bringing the event to Nevis, would you be ready to host it?

M.B.: Interestingly enough, we actually offered to host CaribAvia this year, although it ultimately didn't work out.So the short answer is absolutely yes. Bud is an extraordinary individual. He brings incredible energy, deep industry knowledge and an unwavering passion for aviation. Personally, I

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have found him to be an invaluable resource and a tremendous advocate for Caribbean aviation. From our perspective, we would be delighted to host CaribAvia in Nevis. The only consideration is timing. Ideally, we would love to welcome delegates once the airport development is complete so they can experience the island and its new facilities at their very best. But without question, we would be thrilled to host the event and showcase everything Nevis has to offer.

T.O.: I believe an event like CaribAvia is about much more than bringing industry professionals together to discuss aviation and spend a few days networking. It's an opportunity to introduce an island to the world. The impact often continues long after the event itself. People return home, share their experiences and become ambassadors for a destination. That kind of exposure creates lasting value and can influence perceptions for years to come.

M.B.: I completely agree. Nevis is a niche destination, and we intend to keep it that way. That is our model, and we firmly believe it is the right path for us. We know who we are, we know the type of experience we want to offer, and we are committed to preserving that identity as we grow. Thank you very much for the opportunity. I've truly enjoyed our conversation, and I look forward to speaking with you again soon.

T.O.Thank you, and speak to you soon.

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