

Gatwick eyes second chance on new runway

Graeme Paton, Transport Correspondent

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Annual passenger numbers at the West Sussex airport rose by 7.7 per cent to a record 44.1 million TIM OCKENDEN/PA

Gatwick will make a fresh pitch for a second runway as the airport says that for the first time it had carried more than 44 million passengers in a year.

Britain's second biggest airport sought to exploit possible indecision over the expansion of Heathrow by confirming that its own proposals remained "financeable and deliverable".

The airport's annual results showed passenger numbers rose by 3.2 million or 7.7 per cent in the last financial year, to 44.1 million. The overwhelming majority — almost 37 million — travelled on short-haul routes between the UK and mainland Europe, it said.



The airport now serves 60 long-haul routes, including to Taipei, the capital of TaiwanALAMY

However, the airport insisted that growing numbers of travellers were taking advantage of an expansion of long-haul flights to the US and the Far East, shedding its traditional image as a “bucket and spade” airport.

Gatwick announced that a new route between London and Taipei would be operated by China Airlines from December. It would bring the total number of long-haul routes to 60.

It adds to the recent expansion of “budget” long-haul routes operated by the low-cost carrier Norwegian to destinations such as North America, Singapore and Buenos Aires.

Gatwick insisted that the expansion underlined its credentials as a viable alternative to Heathrow, which takes the vast bulk of Britain’s business travellers going to economically important destinations in the Far East and Middle East.

The lack of long-haul routes out of Gatwick was one of the reasons given for choosing to expand Heathrow over the West Sussex airport when the government made the decision last year.

However, critics have speculated in recent weeks that the government may be softening its line on Heathrow, particularly with key cabinet figures such as Boris Johnson still opposed.

Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour leader, is also a strong critic of Heathrow and could choose to make the expansion process difficult for Theresa May's minority government.

Ministers insist that there is no doubt over the Heathrow plans. This week, Lord Callanan, the new aviation minister, used his first speech to back Heathrow expansion and say that "unless we get this runway built", Britain's airports would continue to fall behind competitors elsewhere in Europe.

Nevertheless, Stewart Wingate, chief executive of Gatwick, said it remained a viable option "if Heathrow stumbles".

"We don't want to get embroiled in the problems of Heathrow; that's a matter for them and the government," he said. "For Gatwick, the homework question that was set for us was can you successfully build long-haul routes, and we are demonstrating we can do that.

"We are happy to go ahead and build a new runway at Gatwick because we can see the demand from passengers. We would build in addition to Heathrow or, if Heathrow stumbles, instead of Heathrow."

The airport said that figures to the end of June, after its year-end, showed it had broken the 45 million mark — a record.

Pre-tax profits were down from £141 million to £131.8 million due to higher operating costs. The airport invested £272 million in the year, including a huge new bag drop area for Easyjet, security gates and an upgraded VIP lounge for British Airways and Virgin Atlantic.

Heathrow plan could still fail

The airport commission's verdict on Gatwick could not have been clearer (Graeme Paton writes). Sir Howard Davies, its chairman, rejected its bid for a second runway on the grounds that it would be more beneficial to the Spanish and Greek tourist industries than the British economy.

“About 70 per cent of its tourist passengers are Brits going to the sun,” he said. “Sadly, relatively few residents of Marbella and Corfu come here for their summer break.”

Two years on, and eight months after the government accepted his recommendation to expand Heathrow, Gatwick is refusing to give up. Yesterday the airport insisted that it was a viable option by announcing it would soon operate 60 long-haul routes. This includes newly added destinations such as Taipei, Singapore and the Chinese cities of Chongqing and Tianjin.

The government is committed to Heathrow, with the national policy statement that paves the way for a third runway proceeding through parliament. This week, Lord Callanan, the aviation minister, used his maiden speech to say it was vital to prevent Britain’s biggest hub sliding behind European rivals such as Paris, Amsterdam and Frankfurt.

Doubts linger, however. Lord Adonis, chairman of the National Infrastructure Commission, warned the project was threatened by a hard Brexit, with private investment in big projects off the table unless Britain maintained its EU links.

Parliamentary uncertainty also poses problems. If Theresa May falls, the arch-Heathrow opponent Boris Johnson could replace her. And Jeremy Corbyn may make things difficult for the policy.

Heathrow’s attempt to build a third runway has collapsed twice before over the past two decades.

With the need for extra airport capacity in southeast England now at critical levels, Gatwick believes it is in a strong position to capitalise if Heathrow fails for a third time.

19 comments

Post Comment

Peter Parkinson

Bring new runways out of London to the coast and upgrade local service and travel, Bring London firms outside into the countryside and also the jobs and have a better life.
Pollution will stuff London up again.

Voxpop

Waste of time talking about this. Gatwick is owned by a New York hedge fund that does not pay tax in the UK and wants to 'flip' this asset now that it was not awarded the second runway last time.

This article and the propaganda behind it is just a way of increasing the value of its asset before flogging it to some other finance house.

No second runway will ever be built at Gatwick.

David Mitchell

"A bucket and spade airport " astonishing snobbery. Why do long haul flights confer more prestige than taking families on holiday?

Marcus Molloy

Because the peaks and troughs of the holiday market leads to inefficient utilisation of the asset (I.e. airport) and the staff/services needed to run it. By contrast, Heathrow can feel less busy during holiday season.

Peter Hobday

Passing through Gatwick is now fast I just discovered. But getting from North to South terminal needs overhauling, as does the nutty train station.

The rail companies appear to think that everyone who travels is a regular rail commuter. What about visitors?

mij.reeb

Indubitable health issues already surround HR and GW and litigation will last decades. Best not add to those two raging infernos lest they broach the surface.

Thames Estuary is your main man for a proper grownups National Capital Airways Hub.

I seem to remember giving advice on this matter before and on more than one occasion.

I need to get some invoices off.

There is no justification for adding to the already compromised health status of the community on the flight paths beneath the existing facilities and with the growing influx of peoples with potentially enhanced adverse liabilities to AVGas both burnt and raw spirit and kerosine and vapourised oils now known to have killed at least one member of the flightdeck it would be a hardy parliamentarian who would stick his neck out on behalf of this enduring annual.

"Cry — God for Harry! England and Saint George

Follow me, to the Estuary!!"

it'sme

@mij.reeb

Mad - quite mad.....but I like you..

Peter Hobday

@it'sme @mij.reeb -- I too have noticed a lack of speed by government to pick up on my advice.

I make everything quite clear, and when I return to the subject, sometimes a year or more later, absolutely nothing has been done! Sometimes I think "What's the point?"

Chris Frankland

Wasn't Gatwick billed recently as "the world's worst airport"? Why not make improvements to that reputation, before building another runway?

Cyclops

Except as a very frequent passenger who transits LGW at least 20 times a year I would suggest it is so far from being the worst as to make this survey absurd on its face.

Chris Frankland

@Cyclops perhaps you are seeing LGW through rose-tinted glasses, or one eye perhaps?

Peter Hobday

@Chris Frankland @Cyclops --- yes Chris, Cyclops is looking at Gatwick as a regular commuter, for which it, and the rail service, is obviously designed. For infrequent travelers and visitors, Gatwick is a puzzle within a nightmare. Except for British travelers passing through the passport machines. Those are efficient.

The tiny island of Bali has a much better airport, as does the tiny island of Singapore (obviously, as Changi is the best) and Dubai is good for a hub. At Changi, you can buy a meal for £2.50, including a drink, with fast service. At Gatwick it is often impossible to find a seat, and always impossible to avoid getting ripped off.

Peter Parkinson

Should be elsewhere and built infrastructure outside London there are too many planes operating in and out both airports, one day there will be an accident and maybe homes damaged and people hurt.

Manston should have been the airport or Lydd out of the way with high speed links to London.

Ben Naylor

Build both runways and a train link between the two airports.

David Tallboys

One each at Gatwick and Stansted. Just get on with it.

bx101

Why can't Heathrow and Gatwick both get new runways? It sounds like they both need them.

Oliver Frey

I find it difficult to understand why the government doesn't just give them the go-ahead – the finance seems in place and objections are relatively minor: why should Heathrow hold things up? While I'd prefer my 'local' Birmingham airport to grow, I think Gatwick deserves a well-earned chance to build on its recent years of investment in their infrastructure.

Cruise Daddy

The trouble with Gatwick is not the airport but the link with London via Southern Railway. Which as we all know is not up to the job.

Alan Carter

@Cruise Daddy true but considering how long it takes to do anything here I suspect Southern will be long gone by the time a second runway is open