

LONDON CITY AIRPORT



the airport of the future

Mark Smulian reports on the expansion of London City Airport

It's a safe bet that 'London Woolwich Intercontinental' was not among the names considered seriously when London City airport was planned, even if the old Metropolitan Borough of Woolwich did jump the river to take in the area concerned.

But south east London has had a direct line to the airport since the opening of the Docklands light Railway extension to Woolwich Arsenal in January. And from next September, London City is due to get a direct link to New York, its first intercontinental flight – so that's most of south east London to the Big Apple in two changes.

City is still mainly a business airport, although it offers plenty of scope for city breaks in Europe. It was conceived in the early days of the regeneration of Docklands, and is an unusual airport because its location on a narrow strip between water means only aircraft capable of a short take off can use it.

Recession or not, the airport plans to grow. In October it somewhat controversially gained permission from Newham Council to increase the annual total of flights to 120,000, up from 79,616.

Campaigners against noise objected, but council officers recommended approval, noting that within two years the airport would implement a new monitoring and management strategy to minimize the impact of noise on the surrounding communities.

Another unusual aspect of the airport is that, partly to reduce noise nuisance, it is not open after 10pm and is closed on Saturday afternoon and Sunday mornings.

Airport spokeswoman Rupa Haria says there will be increased services and frequencies over the coming years, not least for the Olympic Games.

'We are located just two miles from the Olympic site, making it an ideal choice for inbound visitors to the games,' she says.

This might seem a brave move in the face of the failures in the past year of transatlantic business-class only carrier Silverjet and Eos. But BA chief executive Willie Walsh emphasises London City's status as a business airport close to the Square Mile and Canary Wharf. 'This niche service will fly passengers between the heart of the two largest financial centres in the world,' he says.

'London City is located minutes away from some of our key corporate customers and is in one of the fastest growing areas of the capital.'

BA has also ordered 11 aircraft from Brazilian manufacturer Embraer to provide a new fleet for the BA CityFlyer operation, which serves continental Europe, Ireland and Scotland. City Flyer's managing director Peter Simpson sees more flights coming. Welcoming Newham's decision to increase the permitted total of flights, he says: 'Our future growth at London City Airport is dependent on its expansion.'

'Although we are primarily a business airline we have seen promising growth in leisure business, particularly to destinations like Nice and ski destinations such as Geneva.'

BA is not alone in expanding operations at London City. In January, Aer Arann launched a service to Isle of Man, and SunAir to Billund in Denmark.

Lufthansa, which has more than 80 flights a week, is 'always looking for new opportunities', a spokesman said of possible expansion at City.

London City seemed an improbable airport when it opened – inaccessible and usable only by smaller aircraft.

Now, 21 years on, it is growing and new transport links make it the easiest airport to reach from a swathe of London.

Business travellers could take the DLR a few minutes from Woolwich Arsenal, check-in and be reclining on their flat bed en route to New York long before they could have even reached most of London's other airports.

London City is never going to rival the breadth of services offered by those airports because its size and runway limitations ultimately cap its growth.

But it is capturing an increasing share of the business market and its airlines are dipping their toes into leisure flights.

For south east London there is an expanding airport right on its doorstep, which will grow in importance as it exploits its status as the closest place to land for the Olympic Games.

“THE BIG BREAKTHROUGH IS THE BA NEW YORK FLIGHT”

City was also unusual in being built in a remote location with few transport links. Until the DLR reached it in 2005 passengers had to arrive by taxi or bus, something of a deterrent to using it.

The DLR extension changed that, and a Transport for London report two years after its opening found that the switch to public transport involved had produced around 120,000 fewer taxi and 288,000 fewer car journeys.

City has long been noted for its swift check-in – no long queues of holidaymakers waiting to board jumbo jets – and now it is possible, with a little luck, to get from the DLR to departure lounge in around 15 minutes.

Some 3.3m people used the airport in 2008, a 12% increase on the previous year, although according to the Civil Aviation Authority the number of aircraft movements last November was 6,896, some 4% down on November 2007, perhaps a sign of the times.

May last year saw City complete the largest investment programme since it was built. At a cost of some £50m, four 20,000 sqm aircraft parking stands have been constructed on concrete piles over the King George V Dock, and the airport's departure lounge has been extended and refurbished, increasing passenger seating by 250.

'London City welcomes the long-term legacy of transport and infrastructure that the games bring to this area of London.'

She adds that the DLR extension to Woolwich will not only cut journey times for passengers from south east London but also make jobs at the airport more accessible to the area's residents.

More than 2,000 people work at London City, either directly for the airport or for an airline, retailer or service company.

New destinations are often added, but the big breakthrough is the BA New York flight.

One might wonder how a transatlantic flight can use an airport restricted to short take-off aircraft.

The answer is that it can't. BA's flight will take a short hop to Shannon, in Ireland, where passengers will go through America's immigration formalities while the aircraft is refuelled before continuing to New York's JFK airport, where they will be able to bypass the often lengthy immigration queues.

Shannon is the first airport outside the USA to be granted this facility. The return journey though is non-stop.

The flights will be operated by Airbus 318 aircraft and will be business class only, with just 32 seats, all of which can become a fully flat bed.



DESTINATIONS SERVED BY LONDON CITY AIRPORT

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|--------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Amsterdam (BA, KLM, VLM) | Edinburgh (CityJet) | Manchester (VLM) |
| Antwerp (VLM) | Eindhoven (VLM) | Milan Linote (Air One) |
| Barcelona (BA) | Frankfurt (Lufthansa) | Munich (Lufthansa) |
| Basel (Swiss) | Geneva (BA, Swiss, CityJet) | Nice (BA, Air France) |
| Berlin Tegel (Lufthansa) | Glasgow (BA) | Oslo (SAS) |
| Billund (SunAir) | Hamburg (Lufthansa) | Paris CDG and Orly (CityJet) |
| Brussels (VLM) | Isle of Man (Aer Arann) | Rotterdam (VLM) |
| Copenhagen (SAS) | Jersey (VLM) | Stockholm (SAS) |
| Dublin (CityJet) | Luxembourg (Luxair, VLM) | Strasbourg (CityJet) |
| Dundee (CityJet) | Lyon (BA) | Zurich (BA, Swiss) |
| Düsseldorf (Lufthansa) | Madrid (BA) | |