

# Hebridean Islanders

ABOVE RIGHT • Hebridean's two Islanders are not often seen together, but were both used to bring visitors to a special event on Islay. HEBRIDEAN AIR SERVICES VIA THE AUTHOR

The Britten-Norman Islander's robust design and construction is ideally suited to the passenger loads, short flight sectors and tight turnarounds on the airline's routes. It's also perfect for the smaller airfields and shorter runways on Coll and Colonsay.

HEBRIDEAN AIR SERVICES VIA THE AUTHOR

On the west coast of Scotland one airline has forged a unique and highly valued link with the island communities it serves.

**David Ransted** profiles Hebridean Air Services.



From the resort town of Oban, Hebridean Air Services links the Scottish mainland with four of the Inner Hebrides islands: Islay, Tiree and the smaller and less populous Colonsay and Coll. The air link was launched in 2008 by Highland Airways but was taken over by Hebridean on April 6, 2010 when the former ceased flying. Previously owned by George Cormack, Hebridean was sold to the large and diverse Cranfield-based Airtask Group in September 2016. Although now based in Oban, the airline retains a presence at its former headquarters at Cumbernauld Airport, northeast of Glasgow, where the author talked to Ground Operations Manager, Martin McWilliam.

## Islanders for islanders

Hebridean Air Services operates two nine-seat Britten-Norman BN2B-26 Islanders – G-HEBO (c/n 2268) and G-HEBS (c/n 2267) – both are painted in the airline's eye-catching all-yellow livery. While one aircraft and two pilots are based at Oban for scheduled flights to the islands, the second is held in reserve at Cumbernauld Airport for cover during maintenance as well as flying ad hoc charters. The two Islanders joined the fleet separately, G-HEBS arriving in late 2007 and G-HEBO in 2012, although coincidentally they came off the Britten-Norman production line consecutively in the early 1990s. Before joining Hebridean both Islanders flew in Japan where they fulfilled a very similar role to their current occupation, one with Shin Chuo Koku (New Central Airlines), linking Chōfu Airport near Tokyo with four of the islands in the Izu archipelago off the coast of Honshu, the other with Nagasaki Airways/Oriental Air Bridge, flying to islands off Kyushu.

The robust and sturdy Islanders are ideally suited to the passenger loads, short flight sectors and tight turnarounds on Hebridean's routes, and >>

### Hebridean Air Services: Quick Facts

Fleet:	2 x Britten-Norman BN-2B-26 Islanders
Headquarters:	Oban Airport
Website:	<a href="http://www.hebrideanair.co.uk">www.hebrideanair.co.uk</a>
Parent website:	<a href="http://www.airtask.com">www.airtask.com</a>



flying to the smaller airfields and shorter runways on Coll and Colonsay. As is so often the case with Islander operators, the question 'What could replace the Islander when the time comes?' is met with a short pause followed by "Another Islander!"

#### **Triangular routings**

Hebridean's core operation is its largely four-days-a-week public schedule, twinning two of the islands on alternate weekdays: On Mondays and Wednesdays it flies a triangular Oban-Coll-Tiree-Oban routing in

*Passengers are led out to the aircraft by the pilot during the brief stop at Coll.*

*ABOVE RIGHT • The terminal at Coll. The opening on the left houses the Fire Service while ATC is handled from an office behind the adjacent window. Behind the large window to the right is the departure gate and beyond that is the check-in area. Arriving passengers simply pass through the gate to the right.*

the morning, reversing the order in the afternoon, while on Tuesdays and Thursdays an Oban-Colonsay-Islay schedule runs, and is again reversed in the afternoon. The afternoon Islay/Colonsay rotation is flown an hour earlier in winter so that aircraft can depart Colonsay and return to Oban during daylight.

In addition to the public schedule a link is provided for children living on Coll and Colonsay who travel to secondary school in Oban. In the summer season (late March to late October), Hebridean carries the youngsters from

Coll to Oban on Sunday afternoons, returning them to Coll on Fridays. However, in the winter the pupils from both Coll and Colonsay travel to Oban on Sundays, returning to the islands on Saturday mornings due to the airfield restrictions on night flying, making a rather short weekend at home for them.

The runways on both airfields are unlit and it can be dark here by 4pm in the winter, but a return to the islands in daylight on a Friday afternoon would cut too far into the school day. When there are spare seats on these 'scholar flights' the carrier opens them up for

general sale on its web site, and these can be booked from the Wednesday beforehand, when final booked loads are confirmed. It estimates around 60% of passengers originate on the mainland, the remainder on the islands, with many undertaking day trips.

Frequent travellers become familiar faces to the Hebridean pilots: Julie Angell, one of the two pilots based in Oban, has been flying since the operation started and recalls how she has seen some of her student passengers grow into adulthood and now carries their own children on flights to and

from the mainland. She believes the airline has helped the islands sustain their populations and has greatly improved many islanders' quality of life, with parents now able to choose to remain on the islands in the knowledge that their children can use the air service to commute to secondary school in Oban. In fact, the small and once-dwindling population of Coll is now thriving, with an increasing number of children living on the island, and occasionally the carrier must add a second Coll rotation to its weekly school run. >>

*En route Oban to Coll. Hebridean Islanders generally cruise at between 100 and 150 knots.*

*FAR LEFT • Take-off from the expansive former military runway at Tiree. The carrier only uses part of the concrete runway as the rest has been closed.*

*No, not the Caribbean, but the pristine and deserted beach at Crossapol Bay on Coll. In 2013 the island was designated a Dark Sky Preserve due to the almost complete absence of light pollution.*

*ALL PHOTOS AUTHOR UNLESS STATED*



## Public Service

Three of the four islands are linked with the mainland through a Public Service Obligation (PSO) – the UK equivalent of the US Essential Air Services model – awarded by the Argyll and Bute Council. Rotations to the fourth island, Islay, which aren't covered by the agreement, are self-funded by the airline. The PSO, which is renewable through tender process every three years – with the current agreement running until May 2018 – provides a subsidy to the carrier to maintain the links to and from the islands. Frequencies are approved with the council and a service level agreement is in place covering punctuality and regularity targets.

Hebridean stepped in at very short notice in 2010 to maintain the PSO link to the islands after Highland Airways entered administration. Martin McWilliam takes up the story: "The council contacted us, and we set up a hastily arranged schedule over the Easter Bank Holiday weekend. On the Monday we had the network up and running in time to maintain the following week's schedule."

The public service aspect of these flights can take on a more personal nature too, as witnessed during the author's visit, when the pilot was handed a medical prescription just before departing Oban, to be hand-delivered on arrival in Tiree.

*Looking down on one of the airline's Islanders from the air traffic control tower at Oban.*

## Flying the routes

The short sectors involved mean that cruising altitude on the routes is not maintained for long, but generally Hebridean's Islanders fly at around 2,000ft or slightly higher. Both altitude and routing are determined by several factors, with safety considerations of course paramount. Prevailing weather conditions usually dictate that flights are conducted at between 1,000

and 4,000ft, but occasionally they can be lower or higher, the highest this year being 6,000ft between Tiree and Oban. The highest ground in the area covered by the routes is the mountain of Ben More, on the Isle of Mull. Standing at 3,169ft (965m), its peak can often be shrouded in mist or low cloud.

Although the distances travelled from the mainland, and between the islands, are not great (the longest sector, Oban to Tiree, is around 55 miles [89km]; the shortest, Coll to Tiree, just 16 miles [26km]). Glasgow Airport is designated as an alternate if required. The Islander is fuelled with a minimum of two hours' endurance when leaving Oban as a matter of company policy.



**The Islanders' large windows afford unencumbered views of the stunning Hebridean landscapes and dramatic coastlines...**

Depending on weather conditions on the day this can be increased even further – the total fuel loaded is at the pilot's discretion.

While the Islanders are flown by a single pilot, they are Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) equipped, but on the schedules to the islands Visual Flight Rules (VFR) are the norm because the smaller airfields operate as VFR only (it would be uneconomic to install IFR), and transitioning between IFR and VFR requires specific procedures which can't be carried out everywhere. However, when flying charters to other airports IFR is generally used as the preferred method over longer distances and for ease in avoiding severe weather en route.

While flying at low altitudes is a routine part of the airline's schedule for the frequent local

travel-

lers, it offers a real bonus for

visitors to this part of the world. The Islanders' large windows afford unencumbered views of the stunning Hebridean landscapes and dramatic coastlines making it possible to pick out landmarks such as Fingal's Cave on the Isle of Staffa and the beautiful Tobermory harbour on Mull.

## Weather

While wind and rain rarely interrupt flying for the hardy Islanders, poor visibility is the single biggest cause of delays, although a very small proportion of flights each year are cancelled (ironically this tends to happen more in the summer months when the islands are more prone to low cloud and fog). Wind direction is predominantly from between the southeast or northwest, with most take-offs and landings at Oban and on the islands being towards the south or west. The weather in this area can change quickly, and while Oban might be clear, conditions on the islands – only a short distance away – can be very different, with rain and overcast and a significant difference >>

*Islander G-HEBO basks in sunshine on the ramp at Oban between its morning and afternoon sorties.*

## Mileage and scheduled journey times

Route	Mileage	Flight time*	Ferry time**
Oban to Coll	44 miles (71km)	30mins	2hrs 40mins
Coll to Tiree	16 miles (26km)	15mins	55mins
Tiree to Oban	55 miles (89km)	35mins	2hrs 20mins
Oban to Colonsay	37 miles (60km)	25mins	2hr 30mins
Colonsay to Islay	24 miles (39km)	20mins	1hr 10mins
Islay to Oban	54 miles (87km)	40mins	3hrs 45mins

\* non-stop flight times, however some flights on these triangular routing are one stop depending on the time of day.  
\*\* shortest ferry journey, some scheduled times are longer.



*Final approach to Islay's Runway 08/26 which has been reduced in length to 2,083ft (635m) – the original length and width of the former RAF Port Ellen air strip is still evident as the Islander comes in to land from the east.*



*The Islander's cabin is fitted with nine passenger seats, including one alongside the single pilot.*

**TOP • The Islander's cockpit instruments and the distinctive wraparound windscreen that affords excellent visibility for the single pilot.**

**Airfields**  
At each island stop – scheduled for either 10 or 15 minutes – the engines are shut down while the pilot helps pas-

sengers disembark and unload their luggage. He or she then proceeds to the terminal to greet and brief joining passengers and escort them to the Islander (transiting passengers remain on board at these stops). Once aboard, the pilot delivers the safety briefing (including where to locate the supplied earplugs) before start-up. The airports on the four islands are manned only when flights are scheduled, with the islands' fire services slotting in arrivals and departures with their other duties. At Colonsay and Coll, Hebridean provides the only scheduled arrivals. At



busier Oban, which sees a significant amount of visiting and transiting aircraft, the three-strong fire service team maintains a continuous daytime presence, rotating duties so that one person is always manning the control tower.

The airports at Colonsay and Coll are partly funded by European Union grants, and the small wooden terminal buildings on both were built to a near-identical design. Each have a single 1,640ft (500m) unlit asphalt runway, well within the capability of the Islanders, even when fully loaded.

in temperature. The golden rule is that the aircraft won't leave Oban – where it is hangered each night – unless it can be sure of getting back later in the day. Rarely, when marginal weather is particularly localised, one of the two islands on the itinerary may be dropped while the other is still served. The airline and ferries may compete for passengers, but they can sometimes complement each other, one operating when the other cannot. While the ferries are largely unaffected by poor visibility, the aircraft are similarly unaffected by the rough seas that can prevent ferries from docking.

### Airfields

At each island stop – scheduled for either 10 or 15 minutes – the engines are shut down while the pilot helps pas-

The much larger facilities on Islay and Tiree are both former Royal Air Force bases, as is evident from the familiar triangle pattern of the original three runways (although flying had existed on these islands before World War Two). Both now boast modern, spacious terminal buildings. Islay utilises two asphalt runways of 5,069ft and 2,083ft (1,545m and 635m) while Tiree also has two asphalt runways of 4,830ft and 2,598ft (1,472m and 792m) in length, plus the use of a 2,620ft (799m) section of a partly closed concrete runway.

Before its sale to the Airtask Group (formerly Direct Flight), Hebridean Air Services' administrative headquarters was at Cumbernauld Airport, 18 miles (29km) northeast of Glasgow. Here owner, George Cormack, a pioneer of highlands and islands air links since the 1960s and a world-renowned expert in flying the Britten-Norman Islander, maintains an overhaul facility, Cormack Islander Aircraft, specifically for the type.

### Keeping busy

In addition to its scheduled services and its weekly school runs, Hebridean flies ad-hoc charters that extend throughout the UK for business customers, tourists and VIPs. These have included visits to Scottish distilleries and wildlife-spotting trips, as well as aerial photography. The versatile Islanders have also been used for ad hoc cargo charter work as diverse as carrying ballot boxes for UK elections, transporting human organs for transplant operations and carrying telecoms and electrical engineers to remote locations to reconnect electrical supplies or phone lines after storm damage.

A recent sortie saw one of the Islanders employed to fly over the



remote and uninhabited North Rona and Sula Sgeir, northwest of Cape Wrath, so that the Historic Environment Scotland agency could conduct aerial photography and monitor the local gannet population. For just this kind of mission one of the Islanders, G-HEBS, has been fitted with a Direct Vision convex window on the starboard side of the cockpit, so that undistorted images can be taken

### Ceud mile fàilte – A warm welcome

Flying between Oban and the Inner Hebrides affords passengers not only a glimpse into the close relationship between Hebridean and the people it serves, but also provides an up-close look at the carrier's operations as well as showcasing some of the most spectacular scenery around the British Isles. For the close-knit communities

on the four islands, the airline provides a highly valued bridge to the mainland; for visitors it offers a quick and convenient link that is prefaced by captivating aerial views, with each island priding itself in offering the warmest of welcomes. While many people may not look forward to another day at work, Hebridean pilot Wolfgang Pilch sees it very differently: "It's another day when I get to go flying!" **AW**

The author would like to thank pilots Wolfgang Pilch and Julie Angell, Ground Operations Manager Martin McWilliam, Cormack Islander Aircraft owner/operator George Cormack and all the teams at the airports in Oban, the Inner Hebrides and at Cumbernauld for their help in the preparation of this article

**Hebridean's BN2B-26 Islander, G-HEBO, after landing at Oban.**  
HEBRIDEAN AIR SERVICES VIA THE AUTHOR

Hebridean Air Services – Fleet						
Reg	C/n	Model	Built	Delivered to HAS	Formerly	
G-HEBO	2268	BN-2B-26	1993	October 3, 2012	G-BUBK, JA5319	
G-HEBS	2267	BN-2B-26	1993	December 7, 2007	G-BUBJ, JA5318	

