



**AIR BOTSWANA**

*Going Your Way*

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## **FLYING THE FLAG**



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# FLYING THE FLAG

*Botswana has transformed itself from a sleepy African country to a vibrant democratic economy and as Alan Swaby learns, its national airline is trying to emulate the country's progress*







Air Botswana plane on runway

It's an understandable aspiration that developing countries want to be represented on the larger international stage through their own national airline carrier. Understandable, but fraught with danger—at least of the economical kind—as many African countries have discovered to their cost.

“It's unlikely,” says Sakhile Reiling, recently appointed general manager of Air Botswana, “that any regional airline can survive, unaided by government subsidies, on just that country's own population. To provide a service to their citizens, airlines must look inwards; but to stand on their own feet economically, they have to look outwards.”

Since independence from Britain in 1966, Botswana has seen a succession of airlines trying to satisfy that local need. But in 1988, the government decided the time was right for a national flag carrier and created Air Botswana through an act of parliament.

In its current form, the airline is not at all grand. It's based at Sir Seretse Khama International Airport in the capital Gaborone and runs a modern but modest fleet of turbo-propeller aircraft from the specialist French-Italian manufacturer ATR, comprising two new 68-seat ATR 72-500 aircraft and three smaller 47-seat ATR42-500s. It also has a BAe 146 jet.

The airline was created no doubt with a touch of national vanity in mind but

its main role is to leverage other aspects of the country's economy. As such, Air Botswana runs a regular schedule of flights on a hub and spoke basis from Gaborone to Francis Town, Kasane and Maun—the other main cities in Botswana—and to important neighbouring destinations such as Johannesburg, Lusaka and Harare.

With Botswana destined to become a major diamond trading centre, the mix may well change in future years but presently tourism accounts for 60 per cent of passengers carried and business the other 40 per cent. Maun lies on the edge of the great Okavango Delta—the largest inland delta on earth—while Kasane is the gateway to Chobe River and National Park

on the northern border with Namibia. In all cases, the timetable pays close attention to the needs of both business and leisure travellers. As Botswana is not yet ready to accept inter-continental flights, tourists generally arrive at Johannesburg on long-haul flights and then transfer readily to Air Botswana services for their onward flight direct to these tourism centres.

In terms of occupancy rates, Air Botswana is doing very well, with an average of 80 per cent. Last year, for example, US airlines reported a domestic occupancy rate of 77 per cent—the highest level achieved since 1946, according to data compiled by the Air Transport Association. “There are two ways we can improve matters,” says

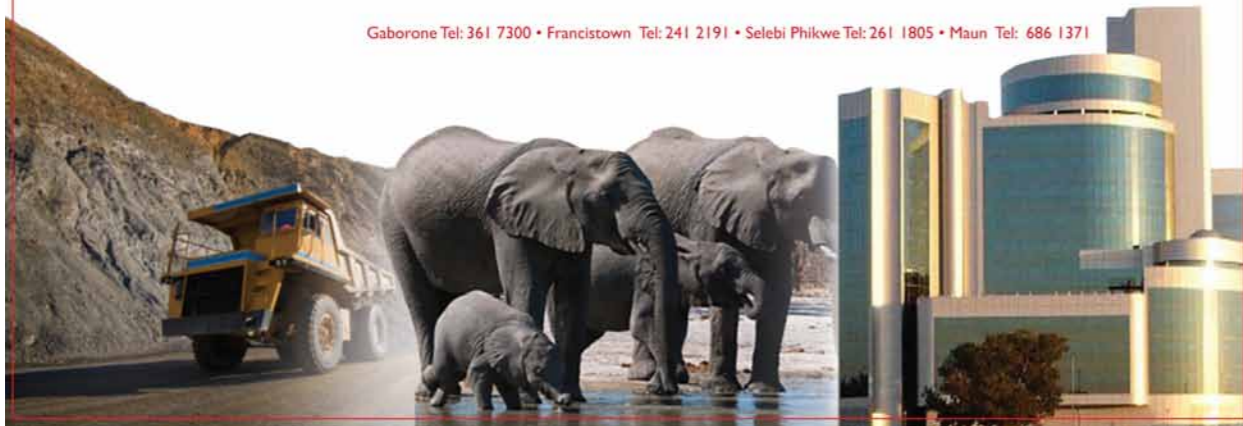




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The airline is based in Gaborone

“TO PROVIDE A SERVICE TO THEIR CITIZENS, AIRLINES MUST LOOK INWARDS; BUT TO STAND ON THEIR OWN FEET ECONOMICALLY, THEY HAVE TO LOOK OUTWARDS”

Reiling. “We can put our planes in the sky for more hours in the day by expanding our night time cargo carrying business. We can also operate longer star burst routes from Gaborone to a larger number of destinations south of the equator.”

As a still practicing pilot herself, this part of the job probably represents the interest closest to Reiling’s heart because Air Botswana has a £380 million investment plan in place for six new aircraft with the first two jets making an appearance in the next few weeks. But as an experienced

airline manager, Reiling knows that change must be handled slowly and painstakingly. In aviation, there are no second chances.

“Our first step will be to go from a maximum route length of 2.5 hours,” she says, “to something in the order of 3.5 to four hours. The new jets will bring Cape Town, Durban, Windhoek and Nairobi within our reach and once they are bedded down we can look even further afield.”

The airline is not without some previous experience of jet aircraft so there is a degree of embedded knowledge within the company

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Air Botswana runs a regular schedule of flights on a hub and spoke basis

## “WE CAN PUT OUR PLANES IN THE SKY FOR MORE HOURS IN THE DAY BY EXPANDING OUR NIGHT TIME CARGO CARRYING BUSINESS”

that can be re-awakened. Nevertheless, it still means that new pilots need to be hired along with maintenance engineers and ground staff who are all experienced on jet aircraft. Even the whole process of passenger relations is being re-evaluated and re-vamped.

Reading between the lines, this is possibly one of the biggest challenges Reiling faces. Having been—and still is for that

matter—solely owned by the state, it seems that the conversion of the mindset among some employees from that of government arm to efficient flying operation capable of competing profitably with all comers has some way to go.

There are another couple of aspects of modern aviation practice that are keeping Reiling busy. “We can also try to improve utilisation,” she says, “by offering passengers

packages of services they need when visiting—car hire for example. Just this week we have signed our first agreement with a hotel and much more needs to be done to create a simple to buy, integrated offering.”

The other consideration is code sharing with carriers on certain routes. “It’s often the case,” says Reiling, “that airlines want a presence in a particular market but simply don’t have the traffic to justify a high frequency schedule. In such cases, we can partner up with another airline and share the route. At times this means we are the carrying partner and at others the marketing partner. But in either case we look after each other’s passengers as if they were our own.”

For Reiling, the appointment at Air

Botswana must feel like coming home. Her flying career started there as a second officer before taking up a position with the country’s civil aviation authority. A similar career step in South Africa—combining flying with working for the aviation regulator—has given her a well-rounded view of both sides of the fence. She is also determined to keep her pilot’s licence and regularly ‘moonlights’ to maintain the flying hours she needs. So it may not come as too big a surprise if her name appears on the manifesto of the new jets when they arrive. **BE**

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