

Gander, Crossroads of the World 1956 – A BOAC employee gives it a five-month trial!

The following text is based on an article written by an employee of the British Overseas Airlines Corporation (BOAC), who spent five months in Gander, starting in January 1956. The original source is unknown but appears to be quite likely a company-related magazine called "Better on a Camel". The name of this employee was Gerry Catling and his original text has been shortened to exclude material not directly relevant to Gander.



Temporary postings as a trainee, or junior station officer, were a lucky dip, and I was rather shocked in January 1956 to be summoned to London to do a 48-hour Atlantic pressure pattern flight-planning course and proceed immediately to Gander, Newfoundland.

Weather in winter could be extreme with blizzards, freezing rain, fog and low cloud often closing airports unpredictably

for days on end. We embarked from the bleak huts at Heathrow North Side, and the Stratocruiser struggled through Prestwick, Keflavik, then overflew Gander and deposited me, a hothouse creature, in a snowy Montreal with a bitter wind beside the solid ice of the St. Lawrence River.

During the following days I went frequently to Dorval Airport to try to get on a Trans Canada Airlines flight to Gander, but with no success, so was eventually advised to fly to Stephenville, Newfoundland and 'take the train if it was running'. When we arrived overhead Stephenville, the runway was blocked by snow and happily for me, we diverted into Gander, where the weather had cleared sufficiently to land.

The Gander passenger terminal was a converted hangar and collection of ex air force wooden huts and I can still smell the very strong, not unpleasant aroma of freshly cut pine resin mixed with Dettol, which greeted disembarking passengers. The airfield scenery was a bleak expanse of driven snow surrounded by pine forest, but the terminal was warm and cosy and I encountered steam-heated buildings for the first time. I found that, unlike England, however cold it is outside, it is rarely cold inside - and people dressed accordingly.

In the arrivals hall, covering one wall, was a vast map of the world with the projection showing Gander at the centre and all the transatlantic and North American air routes passing through. Emblazoned on it in large letters were the words 'GANDER - CROSSROADS OF THE WORLD.' From their perspective, in those days it was true, because before the Boeing 707 era, every international airline had to route its services via Gander, as it was the nearest airport in North America to Europe.

Having run the gauntlet of two grim female health nurses who vaccinated on the spot anyone who could not produce a valid certificate, I looked for a porter to take my heavy suitcase to the wooden boarding house to which I had been directed about 400 yards away. There was none in sight and baggage trolleys, as I recall, had yet to be invented. I asked a very large Canadian Mountie in a red tunic and he growled: "Around here Bud, you carry it yourself".

So I dragged my suitcase through the snow to a two story wooden building called appropriately 'Saturn'. This was the only hotel accommodation in Gander available for night-stopping crews and other travellers who had no fixed abode in the area. The rooms were just big enough for a single bed, a small chair and table and steam heated to temperature of over 80 degrees F. No meals were provided and one had to eat in the airport coffee shop across the snow, which was called the 'Greasy Spoon' - accurately named, as there was only one spoon on a long chain attached to the counter for stirring one's coffee.

New arrivals at the boarding house were admitted by an ancient fierce Scots-Canadian landlady of Presbyterian demeanour, with the welcoming words: "No drinking, no singing, no women here - or you are out." Opportunity would have been a fine thing, as officially Gander was 'dry', and there appeared to be very few young women in the vicinity, so there was not much to sing about and thus cause offence.

To drink legally, only in your own home, it was necessary to visit the post office three miles away, fill in a two page form with the amount of beer and spirits required, and pay at the counter. The form was then dispatched to the liquor store in the capital, St. John's, about 150 miles away and then in about 14 days the order would arrive by train, snowdrifts permitting, at the rail depot. The train always sounded its whistle frequently from about five miles outside Gander

onwards and it was a heartening sight to see the local population leap into their cars and make a dash to the train depot immediately, whatever they were doing at the time.

However, I soon found out that there was an alternative supply of beer provided by an unofficially tolerated character called 'Hot Shot' Maloney, who drove a large gangster style Buick car and dropped off supplies at back doors, including the mounted police post. It was a beer called 'Bud of the North' which was emerald green if supplied on St. Patrick's Day and tasted like nectar in this wilderness.

To obtain a beer of the right temperature, as it was well below zero outside the bedroom window and 80 degrees plus inside, it was necessary to raise the window sash and place the bottle carefully half way across the windowsill to achieve the desired amount of cooling - this required considerable practice. The snowdrifts over the winter built up an inclined plane, almost to the first floor of the building and the empty bottles were thrown out the window to conceal the evidence of illegal drinking. This was fine until the spring thaw, which revealed a large pile of beer bottles in place of the snow, but by this time the criminals had usually departed.

Newfoundland then consisted, apart from a few small towns, mostly of small isolated fishing communities whose only contact with the outside world and each other was by boat. Roads were few and unpaved and generally impassable - in winter with deep snowdrifts, and during the rapid spring thaw by floods, which turned the area into a sea of mud.

Gander Airport and small village were an 'island', only connected to other places by air or by an infrequent train service, so life was very parochial. It was noticeable that this isolation bred eccentricity among the BOAC station staff, some of who had been there on permanent postings for

three or four years, leading to one or two petty animosities. If you had happened to be a sociologist, it would have been a fertile field for study.

In such isolation, it was necessary to make your own amusement. Almost all Stratocruiser transits were westbound to USA and Canada, three or four coming through in the night between 0200 and 0600, often landing in appalling weather conditions with freezing high winds. The Stratocruisers all had bunk beds for passengers to don night attire and stretch out in comfort, and were particularly popular with young female aspiring film starlets heading to Broadway or on their way to Hollywood to try to further their careers. We always pushed the engineering steps up and opened the forward door first, taking the flight plan on board, and then opened the passenger door at the rear. The freezing gale then swept through the passenger cabin blowing all the bed curtains horizontal and causing the scantily dressed starlets to leap from their beds desperately trying to find some warm clothing to put on, and providing some much needed light entertainment for the night shift.



Gander had a small local radio station, which was desperate for any news or item to broadcast to its listeners to insert between the seemingly endless reading of the latest onshore and offshore cod market prices. The station then only had one announcer/broadcaster and he asked us to try to persuade any notable passenger on board in transit to disembark and give a short radio interview, for which he would offer a clandestine bottle of spirits as a reward.

People from the entertainment world were surprisingly eager to be interviewed on first touching down in North America, and the more obscure they were, the quicker they got off the aircraft, thinking that their arrival would be beamed across the continent, little knowing that their words would probably be heard by only a few hundred people in the immediate vicinity. Still, it was our contribution to the 'community spirit'.

Another incident I remember which I thought for a few minutes would abruptly terminate my BOAC career occurred at about 0400 in a small bleak room, illuminated by a single bare light bulb, where at a small wooden table, sitting on a hard chair, muffled in a greatcoat and scarf, I was struggling to finish the loadsheet and get the aircraft away without a delay that I would have to explain. A voice behind my back said: "Can I speak to you for a little while". Without looking round, I said in a fury: "For God's sake, bugger off until I have finished this load sheet and got rid of the aircraft, then I'll talk to you." "That will be too late," he said, and I turned and to my horror recognised Sir Miles Thomas, then Chairman of BOAC. I apologised and he laughed and we had an amiable chat for about 15 minutes until he re-boarded the flight. It gave me great pleasure on sending the departure signal to add 'delay due Chairman.'



After five months in Gander, I returned to London, glad to leave, but having enjoyed a wonderful experience in so many ways and one that would be impossible for anyone to repeat today. I walked into the BOAC traffic branch in London and said to the superintendent: “Have you got anywhere warm for a change?” He said “If you leave tomorrow, you can have six months in Bermuda”.