



The saga of two Icelandic Airports

RKV AND KEF GOING IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS



Iceland's two busiest airports Keflavik (KEF) and Reykjavik (RKV) are 30 miles (50km) from each other; yet, in many ways, they seem continents apart. Both of World War II vintage, Reykjavik has seen little change over the past 60 years and its future is shaky, whereas Keflavik is busy expanding.

Story by KEN DONOHUE

/ airport review /

REYKJAVIK AIRPORT can be traced back to 1919, when an Avro 504 took off from the site of the present-day airport for the first time. This first experiment with powered flight in the country was short-lived. By 1921, the meadow had returned to farm use. Nine years later, aircraft operations came back to the area, when a couple of Dutch Fokker DVII weather observation aircraft were based there for a year. Finally, on March 8, 1940, the Reykjavik City Council selected the meadow for the location of the city's future international airport.

During World War II, Iceland was a neutral country. But its strategic location in the middle of the North Atlantic was desirable for the British, who sailed into Reykjavik in May 1940 and, with little resistance, occupied the country. Additional troops soon arrived from Canada and the United States.

The building of a state-of-the-art airport soon got underway. It opened for operations in June 1941 and was mainly used as a base for long-range maritime patrol aircraft, although Flugfélag Íslands (later Air Iceland) (NY) had an agreement with the occupation forces to use the military airport for its limited domestic flights.

At war's end, commercial flights in Iceland increased dramatically. Both Flugfélag Íslands and Lofleiðir (LL) used the airport for their domestic and international flights.

Lofleiðir continued using the city airport until the mid-1960s, when it acquired Canadair CL-44 turboprops and moved its operations to Keflavik. With the introduction of the Boeing 727 in 1967, Flugfélag Íslands moved its international flights to Keflavik as well, while keeping domestic ones at Reykjavik.



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2 3 Loftleiðir used its Douglas DC-4s on its low-cost services from New York to Luxembourg, via Reykjavik and Prestwick. For roughly half the regular fare, passengers could fly from New York to Europe, albeit taking several hours longer, due to the mandatory stop in Iceland.

4 Built in 1948 the small terminal at RKV serves the domestic operations of Air Iceland, owned by the Icelandair Group. The airport is slated to be closed by 2024, though no final decisions have been made on the relocation of domestic and regional operations.

Today, Reykjavik primarily serves domestic routes, along with service to Greenland and the Faroe Islands. A number of private jets flying between Europe and North America put down at RKV. So do ferry flights during the spring and summer. Situated in the center of the city, its convenience is obvious.

But little did people realize, 65 years ago, that the airport's location would become a politically divisive issue.

REYKJAVIK: DESTINED TO CLOSE?

Upon request of the City of Reykjavik, the airport's shortest runway was closed this year, and, according to Jón Karl Ólafsson, Director of Isavia's Regional Airports, the entire airport is slated for closure in 2024. This,

despite polls suggesting that 70% of Icelanders (and the same proportion of those living in Reykjavik) would like to see the airport remain open.

While there are the usual complaints about living near an airport, the biggest proponents for closure are those who would like to see the area developed. The 130-acre airport site, in the Vatnsmyri area of the city, is the last undeveloped parcel of land in the center of Reykjavik. The greatest opposition to closing the airport comes from those, living in rural areas, who rely on government services in Reykjavik, including the country's major hospital.

“We haven't been able to develop any new buildings because of the dispute about the future of the airport,” says Ólafsson. “The passenger terminal where NY operates was built in 1948 and, while we've redone the inside of the terminal, we'd like to be able to offer a better experience for our passengers.”

Three options are under consideration: Keep the airport where it is, build a new one at another location near Reykjavik, or relocate all operations to the international airport at Keflavik.



“We’ve been having this discussion for decades,” says Ólafsson. “A working group has studied the evidence and looked for suitable options for the airport. They have suggested that a new airport could be built just outside the city, in a place called Hvassahraun. This location is only about 16 miles (25km) from Keflavik Airport. No final decision has yet been taken. Our challenge is that, while we have this situation, we can hardly plan for any long-term investments of infrastructure, we simply maintain what we have.”

According to Ólafsson, domestic airlines claim they will lose 30% to 40% of their business if all operations are moved to Keflavik, a 45-minute drive from Reykjavik. That’s because, in addition to extra ground travel, the airport’s southerly location would add 10 to 15 minutes to the flying time. It’s believed that many passengers would opt to drive to their destinations.

Three carriers operate scheduled flights from RKV. The largest is Air Iceland, the domestic arm of the Icelandair Group, which offers service from Reykjavik to six destinations in Iceland and a growing number of routes to Greenland. Eagle Air (FEI), a smaller domestic airline, flies to five towns in Iceland. Atlantic Airways, an airline based in the Faroe Islands (RC) (*Airways*, February 2016) offers flights between Reykjavik and Vágur Island (FAE) during high season, but moves its operation to Keflavik in winter.

Domestic passenger traffic has been declining for the past few years. This is partly because of the economy, still recovering from the turmoil brought on by Iceland’s economic collapse in 2008, but also because the country’s road network has improved. With Iceland’s Ring Road completed only in 1974,



aviation had been essential to linking much of the country, but the transportation network has since been transformed. It’s now possible to drive from Akureyri in the north to Reykjavik in five hours. This, along with the relatively high cost of fares, has taken a toll on domestic air travel. However, in 2015, the number of domestic passengers rose, slightly, to 385,000, and the market appears to be growing stronger this year.

A BIG ROLE IN AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL

Isavia, a state-run company, is responsible for operating and developing all of Iceland’s airports, and also manages air traffic in the Reykjavik Control Area. The air traffic center is located at Reykjavik Airport, and is one of three controlling air traffic across the North Atlantic Ocean. The two others are in Gander, Canada, and Prestwick, Scotland. The Reykjavik Control Area encompasses 5.4 million square miles and runs from the North Pole to the west of Greenland, east to Norway, and a few degrees south of Iceland. About 25% of flights crossing the North Atlantic fly through this area.

The Iceland Control Centre, which has a staff of 150, including 76 air traffic controllers, coordinates more than 600 aircraft each day. The Centre, which is funded through fees collected by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), is

starting to see an increased number of polar flights, with more planes using that route from eastern Asia and the Middle East to North America. Last year, controllers in Iceland handled more than 145,000 flights in the Reykjavik Oceanic Area: 103,000 were overflights, while the rest were to and from Iceland. The London-Los Angeles route accounts for most of the traffic through this area, making United Airlines (UA) the second-busiest carrier passing through the control area, behind Icelandair (FI) (*Airways*, September 2014). The busiest time of day for flights traversing the Reykjavik Oceanic Area is between 12:00 and 15:00 hours, most of those aircraft traveling westbound. Much of the eastbound traffic crosses between 04:00 and 09:00 hours.

Six countries control air traffic in the North Atlantic: Iceland, Canada, Scotland, Norway, Portugal, and the United States. But it’s the three control centers in Iceland, Canada, and Scotland that decide on the tracks that routinely run south of Iceland. Airlines submit their preferred route based on a number of considerations, most notably the jet stream and city pairing. Since the jet stream flows predominantly from west to east, there is great divergence between the westbound traffic

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4 Built in the 1960s is RKV’s control tower. Adjacent to the tower and of the same vintage Icelandair Hotel Natura and headquarters of Icelandair.



5 PHOTO: BALDUR SVEINSSON



6 PHOTO: KEITH OTTO



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6 Eagle Air is a small Icelandic carrier that offers scheduled service to five destinations in Iceland, along with adventure tours and charters.

7 Atlantic Airways (RC) is an airline based in the Faroe Islands and offers service to Reykjavik, along with a handful of other international destinations.

8 Air Atlanta Icelandic is a charter and ACMI airline specialized in leasing aircraft on an ACMI and wet lease basis to airlines worldwide needing extra passenger and cargo capacity.

profiles and the eastbound ones. By taking advantage of the jet stream and the tailwinds, eastbound aircraft to Europe can save time and fuel.

When Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano erupted in 2010—shooting a plume of ash more than 6km (3.7 miles) high and causing many airports in Europe to close—Iceland's air traffic control center handled an unprecedented 1,000 aircraft in a 24-hour period as traffic was moved northward to avoid the ash cloud. Every air traffic controller was called in to work that day. One AeroMexico pilot bound for Madrid told controllers he had never flown that far north before. This lasted a couple of weeks, until more normal patterns returned.

Reykjavik Airport is closed between 23:00 and 07:00 hours, with no takeoffs allowed on weekends before 08:00. Although the original 1940s-era control tower is still standing, the airport uses a tower constructed in the

1960s. That's also the decade when Lofleiðir (Icelandic Airlines) built an airport hotel and an adjacent building for its headquarters, before merging with Flugfélag Íslands to form the current Icelandair. Today, the Icelandair Reykjavik Hotel Natura, as it is now known, is operated by Icelandair Hotels.

Despite nearly a century of aviation history, the future of Reykjavik Airport seems dim. Unless one last act of political theater can save it, the airport is destined to close, shunted aside by the development of a growing city.

KEFLAVIK LOOKING BRIGHTLY FORWARD

While the British were solidifying their forces at Reykjavik in World War II, the US military, starting in 1942, was building an airport of its own at Keflavik. Located on Iceland's Southern Peninsula, some 30 miles (50km) from Reykjavik, the complex consisted of two airfields:

Meeks and Patterson. Meeks Field, which was at its peak in the summers of 1944 and 1945, when more than 1,000 aircraft a month stopped at the airport en route between Europe and the US, became known as Keflavik International Airport and mainly served transatlantic flights. Patterson Field was home to air defense fighters, but went dormant after the war.

In 1951, a defense agreement between the US and Iceland led to the formation of the Iceland Defense Force, manned chiefly by US military personnel and based at Keflavik Airport. The Americans built a passenger terminal, hotel, hangars, military housing, a contractor camp, and a host of other buildings to support the work of the Defense Force. The airport had originally been built with four 6,000ft runways, one of which was extended to 8,000ft in 1949. In 1953, runway 11/29 was lengthened to 10,000ft. The same was done to runway 02/20 in 1973. Of the four initial runways, only two are currently being used, with the north-south runway (02/20) preferred for reasons of noise abatement, as a residential area sits to the east of the airport, off runway 11/29.

The 1950s-era passenger terminal remained in the middle of the military base until the present one—named for Icelandic explorer Leif Erikson—was completed in 1987 on the other side of the



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airfield. In several respects, until it was disbanded in 2006, the Defense Force proved beneficial to Iceland. While the government of Iceland assumed responsibility for the operation of the passenger terminal and civilian operations, the US military paid for the construction and maintenance of the runways and the upkeep of airside operations.

The airport has a total of 23 gates, 13 of them with jet bridges. Unlike Reykjavik, passenger traffic at Keflavik International Airport has been increasing; in fact, it has doubled in the last five years, with close to five million passengers passing through last year. The airport expects 6.7 million this year. More than a third of passengers are connecting through KEF. This growth has been fueled in large part by Iceland's two major airlines, Icelandair (FI) and WOW air (WW), which have been growing their respective route networks. WOW, a low cost carrier, began operations in 2012, and now serves 27 destinations, including long haul flights to the US West Coast. In the summer peak season, KEF will be served by 25 airlines flying 80 destinations. This is impressive,



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Unsurprising, Icelandair, with its fleet of Boeing 757s, is the largest operator at Keflavik. The airline operates an efficient hub at KEF carrying passengers between North America and Europe.

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The Il-18 is a graceful bird where nothing happens in a hurry.
— Charles Kennedy

given that Iceland's population is just 350,000. “During the summer, we are at capacity,” says Hlynur Sigurdsson, Director of Terminal Operations. “We are working with our tourism partners to spread visits throughout the rest of the year.”

The airport has three peak times during the day. The busiest one is in the morning, when flights arrive from North America and then head out to Europe; in the afternoon, when aircraft return from Europe and then fly back to North America; and, increasingly, around midnight, especially in the summertime, with airlines operating to and from

Europe. “This is a big challenge for the airport, because we experience a large rush of passengers, and then it's quiet,” says Sigurdsson. “It's expensive to operate like this because there is a lot of down time, but we still need to have staff available. Many airports have four peaks where we only have two to three.”

The same infrastructure could handle more passengers if the traffic were spread out more evenly. Currently, no slots are available for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. Any other time of the day, airlines can choose when they want to operate.

/ airport review /



FAST FACTS | KEFLAVÍK INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

IATA: KEF **ICAO:** BIKF
NAME:
 Keflavík International Airport
ADDRESS:
 235 Keflavíkurlugvöllur, Iceland
TELEPHONE:
 +354 425 6000
WEBSITE:
 www.kefairport.is
PASSENGERS:
 4,855,505 (2015)
OWNER/OPERATOR:
 Isavia Limited

AIR TRANSPORT MOVEMENTS:
 39,500 (2015)
ELEVATION:
 169.0 feet / 51.5 m
COORDINATES:
 63.9868° N, 22.6280° W
COMMUNICATIONS:
ATIS: 128.30
Ground Control: 121.90
Tower: 118.30
Approach: 119.30

RUNWAY

11/29	10,056 x 197 feet	3,065 x 60 meters
02/20	10,020 x 197 feet	3,054 x 60 meters

DESTINATIONS

DOMESTIC: Aberdeen, Akureyri, Alicante, Almeria, Amsterdam, Anchorage, Astana, Bagram, Baltimore, Barcelona, Basel/Mulhouse, Belfast, Bergen, Berlin (TXL), (SXF), Billund, Birmingham, Bodrum, Boston, Bremen, Bristol, Brussels, Budapest, Chania, Chicago-O'Hare, Cologne/Bonn, Copenhagen, Denver, Dublin, Düsseldorf, East Midlands, Edinburgh, Edmonton, Fargo, Frankfurt, Friedrichshafen, Gdańsk, Geneva, Glasgow, Gothenburg, Gran Canaria, Halifax, Hamburg, Helsinki, Humberside, Ilulissat, Jakarta-Soekarno-Hatta, Kangerlussuaq, Liège, Liège, London (LGW), (LHR), (LTN), (STN), Los Angeles, Luxembourg, Lyon, Madrid, Málaga, Manchester, Milan-Malpensa, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Moncton, Montréal, Munich, Narsarsuaq, New York-JFK, Newark, Nice, Nuuk, Orlando, Oslo-Gardermoen, Paris (CDG), (ORY), Portland, Prague, Riga, Rome-Fiumicino, Salzburg, San Francisco, Seattle/Tacoma, Shymkent, Stavanger, Stockholm (ARN), (VST), Stuttgart, Tenerife-South, Toronto, Trondheim, Vancouver, Vienna, Vilnius, Warsaw-Chopin, Washington-Dulles, Zürich.

AIRLINES

Aer Lingus, Air Berlin, Air Greenland, Air Iceland, airBaltic, Atlantic Airways, Austrian Airlines, British Airways, Czech Airlines, Delta Air Lines, easyJet, easyJet Switzerland, Edelweiss Air, Eurowings, Germania, Iberia Express, Icelandair, Lufthansa, Niki, Norwegian Air Shuttle, Primera Air, Scandinavian Airlines, Thomson Airways, Transavia France, Vueling, Wizz Air, WOW air.

CARGO AIRLINES: Air Atlanta Icelandic, ASL Airlines Belgium, Atlas Air, Bluebird Cargo, Icelandair Cargo, Volga-Dnepr Airlines.

While final plans are still being developed, it's anticipated that the airport will expand out from the existing terminal to add additional gates with air bridges. If my experience at Keflavik is any indication, it's a good thing that the airport is expanding its passenger terminal. While I waited for an evening flight, the crowded departures lounge was filled with almost 1,000 passengers boarding four flights to North America at the same time.

For those unfamiliar with Iceland's relatively mild winters, it may be surprising—given the country's name and location—that the airport is rarely closed down by weather. When it does snow, seven sweeper crews can clear the

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 — Hlynur Sigurdsson

11 12 The Leif Erikson Terminal at Keflavik was completed in 1987.

Passenger traffic at the airport has doubled over the past five years.

runways in less than 15 minutes. Often, it's strong winds that can play havoc with airport operations. “There are times when the wind is so strong that it's not safe to open the aircraft doors,” says Sigurdsson. “When this happens, we move operations to the other side of the terminal, where it's less windy.”

One thing that's unique about Keflavik: Aircraft manufacturers Boeing, Airbus, and more recently, Sukhoi, send prototypes of their latest designs to the airport for crosswind landing tests and certification trials. There are several reasons for this. As mentioned, Keflavik can be very windy. The runways are at 90° angle to one another, and, operationally, there are slow times throughout the day that allow aircraft to make

repeated landings and takeoffs for hours with practically no traffic. To the flight test departments of the major manufacturers, Keflavik has become the ‘Crosswind Capital of the World.’ It doesn't hurt that the tower is exceedingly cooperative, allowing aircraft to turn off well before reaching the end of the takeoff runway to save time for the next landing, and allowing quick 180° turns after takeoff to quickly land in the opposite direction.

Keflavik is a shining star in the North Atlantic. People are in love with Iceland, and they're coming by the planeloads. In the coming years, the challenge for the airport will be to meet increasing passenger demands while maintaining that welcoming small-airport feel. ✈