

I FIRST heard about Antilles Air Boats while yachting in the Virgin Islands last November. Their ever-punctual 08.00 hrs. Grumman Goose took off en route from St. Thomas to St. Croix and woke me up. Naked in the morning heat, I scrambled on deck to gaze enviously at the sturdy little flying boat, my mind recalling the happy days when I had been a dab hand at Catalinas.

Known as the Virgin Islands' most convenient transportation link, the

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FLYING BY BOAT



International show
business personality
Hughie Green (left)
describes how an
airline manages
without airports in
the Virgin Islands

FLYING BY BOAT

—continued

Antilles operation always lands in the heart of the community it serves, unfettered by an airport that has to be built miles from anywhere. It was started in 1964 by Captain Charles F. Blair and his associates and, although Captain Blair serves as Chief Executive of Antilles Air Boats, he continued until very recently to pilot Pan American flights around the world in Boeing 707s. Incidentally, Captain Blair happens to be married to actress Maureen O'Hara.

Started with a solitary 10-passenger Grumman Goose, in five short years this exciting and, more important, practical operation has become the major inter-island carrier of both the American and British Virgin Islands. From one Goose the fleet has increased to six Geese or six Gooses—I never know which expression is correct—and in 1968 a magnificent 47-passenger Sikorsky VS-44 was put into service.

THIS is a straight flying boat and not an amphibian, and originally flew for American Export Lines between New York and Europe, West Africa and Brazil. With its four engines it is known to the airline's regular travellers (some islanders commute daily) as "Super Goose", and it is interesting to note that Captain Blair first flew the same aircraft in March 1942 during its test flights.

The operation of the Sikorsky refutes all the tales told of the number of people needed to handle a large boat. Conveniently moored with a fore and aft line, the port side of the boat lies easily alongside a pontoon, about 50 ft (15 m) from the shore. Passengers walk aboard, no high steps to climb, the door is shut, engines murmur into life and the two lines are dropped and away we go.

Docking is just as easy. The Goose operation is wonderful to watch. Taking St. Thomas as an example, there are 43 scheduled movements every week-day, plus special flights. In the heart of the downtown area, the concrete ramp bustles with life. New terminal buildings and a hangar, proof of prosperity, are being erected, but in the meantime grab a rum drink and watch the action close to the check-in counter.

Walking out to the Goose we climb aboard on the ramp. Soon one of the company's eight pilots joins us. Right



Passengers board the Sikorsky VS-44 alongside the dock

on time the engines are started and we trundle down the ramp into the blue Caribbean water. The gear is retracted, the engines roar, we're on the step, we're in the air and 25 minutes later we touch down in St. Croix, once again in the centre of town.

This city centre-to-city centre travel accounts for the success of the flying boat operator on the highly competitive inter-island link between St. Thomas and St. Croix (which it flies 18 times daily in competition with Caribair, Caribbean Air Services, and Pan American, all these land-based rivals being handicapped by the ground trip to the airport).

Competition is also hot on the route

St. Thomas-Tortola (AAB—three per day, Prinair—two Heron per day, LIAT—one HS.748 per day). On the other lesser routes linking the two US Virgin Islands with the two British Virgin Islands and with Fajardo in eastern Puerto Rico, Antilles Air Boats is the only operator.

Watching and cheering this waterborne venture makes me wonder how Cunard would have done had they gone in for flying boats; judging by passenger reaction to Antilles Air Boats, very, very well indeed. If you don't believe me, then keep a watch on the way the boats shape up when they enter the key St. Croix-San Juan market. My money is on Captain Blair. ●

How to discover USA

"Americans generally stand a greater distance apart during conversation than Europeans do — so stay about an arm's length away . . . taxidriviers may not open your door or assist you with your luggage because they are forbidden to leave their vehicles . . . (in Connecticut) a woman must not be seated within three feet of a bar"—These are examples of the very practical information to be found in "The USA: A Visitors Handbook", just published by *Time-Life International*.

Some two thirds of the book's 350 pages is devoted to detailed information on visitors' top eight cities (New York, San Francisco,

Chicago, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Boston, Miami and Washington), plus very brief notes on a further 23 cities. The rest is split evenly between background information ("how to survive"), and regional highlights ("typical America").

The book originated in a study of the visitors' comments file at the United States Travel Service headquarters in Washington. This has provided a very down-to-earth quality which is sadly unusual among travel guides.

Verdict: a useful aid for travellers and their counsellors — well worth its \$3.84.