



After a splashy landing and a waddle up the ramp at St. Croix, an amphibious Grumman Mallard awaits next consignment of passengers.

PAM HOBBS/The Globe and Mail

Island-hopping in Caribbean just ducky

BY PAM HOBBS
The Globe and Mail

CHRISTIANSTED, St. Croix

EARLIER THIS year, via a television newscast, I saw a car that was supposed to operate on land and water. It took the ground portion of its test journey just fine, but a few metres into the ocean it sank out of sight as the driver scrambled to get free. That scene haunted me recently when, for the first time in 10 years, I strapped myself into a Grumman Mallard amphibian. However, my apprehension was unfounded. Before the week was through I had zipped about the U.S. Virgin Islands in several 17-seater Mallards — and if I may be permitted a pun, took to it like a duck to water.

My initial flight in 1975 was aboard the smaller Goose, and I can't say I was completely comfortable with the experience of flying smoothly over the Caribbean, then splashing down into it with such force that water rushed over the windows. From there our ungainly Goose waddled up a ramp onto a

downtown parking lot, which proved far more convenient than an airport beyond the city limits. So, with no time to waste during a recent U.S. Virgins tour, I purchased an inter-islands ticket from Virgin Islands Seaplane Shuttle Inc., and have to say I enjoyed the Mallard flights immensely.

In the spring of 1982, New York

Success of the Mallards is partially due to the fact that they can take off and set down on land as well as water. Earlier this year, the airline began a service from San Juan's international airport, which means passengers flying from the U.S. mainland and Canada no longer need to change airports.

At present these seven Mallards

tracks down Mallards to add to his flock, this is an elite breed. For, while there are several hundred of the Grumman Goose and Widgeon in service still, only 35 of the 59 Mallards ever built exist today. The first took to the sky in 1946, and production ceased five years later.

They certainly get around. One is known to have flown under seven

tour of Canada. King Farouk of Egypt had his own Mallard, complete with a throne up front.

For more than 30 years, commercial airlines have put Mallards to work. The first was Pacific Western Airlines. Air Tahiti used to ferry passengers between Papeete and Bora Bora aboard Mallards. At one time Nitto Aviation of Japan flew them between Osaka and Nagoya. Chalk's International Airlines have added Mallards to their Goose population for the Florida-Bahamas run. Still, I can't think anyone is more enthusiastic than the people at Virgin Islands Seaplane Shuttle Inc. His favorite sight, Braunstein told me, is at the end of the day, when all his Mallards come home to roost at the little seaport of St. Croix.

Mallards elite breed not made since 1951

businessman and avid aviator Mickey Braunstein formed this company with two Mallards and a staff of 30 based on St. Croix. Such is the amphibian's popularity, they now have seven Mallards in operation, another five in Texas being rebuilt, and some 130 employees. Currently, their routes connect St. Croix and St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgins, as well as Puerto Rico's San Juan. This is also the only commercial airline to fly into St. John (U.S. Virgins) and Tortola (British Virgins), since neither has a runway.

make 60 scheduled flights a day, the longest being 30 minutes between San Juan and St. Croix. As more planes are ready they will be put into service, so that 1987 should see 125 flights per day. Getting pilots is no problem. Many are ex-service-men only too delighted to live in this tropical climate. Others are local men and Braunstein is so keen on his amphibians he doubles as a pilot when time permits.

According to Matthew Edward Rodina Jr., the company's controller and inveterate historian who

different flags, starting with Canada's when Lord Beaverbrook took delivery in 1947. He sold it to Shell Oil in Indonesia. Next it turned up in Dutch New Guinea, before becoming the property of East Coast Airlines of Brisbane, Australia. For two years it carried men and supplies to a dam project in New Zealand. After that it joined Air Pacific Fleet Ltd. in Fiji. Currently it is registered in the United States, earning its keep in Florida.

Ideal corporate planes, several Mallards have in the past operated in Ontario. According to the Grumman production list, The Globe and Mail purchased one in 1946, then sold it several years later to Irving Oil Transport of New Brunswick. Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip flew from Kamloops to Pennask Lake in a Mallard during their 1959

Travel agents have fares and schedules for the shuttle service. I paid \$99 U.S. for a ticket which allowed travel from San Juan to St. Thomas, then on to St. Croix and back to San Juan. Baggage allowance is 44 pounds, with additional weight costing 30 cents a pound.

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