

# Mangos for Meat

**CANADIAN  
AIRLINES  
CONGO**

**D**eep in jungle country, 400 miles (644km) inland from the Atlantic Ocean's rollers, villagers and hunters exchange meat for mangos on Congo's placid Sangha River. The peace and tranquility is disturbed by the roar of a Boeing 737 taking off from Ouesso's 6,725x147ft (2050x45m) paved runway, before turning southbound to intercept a high-level airway for Brazzaville, the capital and largest city in the country.

## **Beginnings**

The 737-200, TN-AIX (c/n 22632) sports the markings of a two-aircraft African operation, headquartered in the coastal city of Pointe-Noire. The air-

line was founded by Director General Ali El Hussein, a Lebanese-born Canadian who immigrated to Montreal in 1980 at the age of 17. Two years later he enrolled for flight training at a nearby flying club and after a first solo in March 1982, moved on to gain a commercial pilot licence.

Drawn to the so-called 'Dark Continent', Hussein signed on with Société Aéro-Service Afrigo in Pointe-Noire. As the first Canadian to hold a Congolese airline transport pilot's licence (ATP), he logged hundreds of hours on Cessna 404s and Britten-Norman BN-2 Islanders; carrying businessmen, oil exploration experts and village chieftains – creating a host of influential contacts along the way.

*Canadian Airways Congo's 737-215, TN-AIX (c/n 22632) requires extra braking when landing at Ouesso due to its short (6725ft x 147ft) runway and high temperatures.*

(ALL PHOTOS ROBERT S. GRANT UNLESS STATED)

Early on in his career he had ambitions to start an airline, but due to unrest in the Republic of the Congo (RoC) any plans were put on hold and he returned to Canada, taking up a job with Air Montreal; surviving countless low visibility approaches into storm-swept islands in the Gulf of St Lawrence, and fog-locked settlements along Quebec's north shore.

## **Peace at Last**

After a series of power struggles Denis Sassou Nguesso, the President of the RoC signed a peace agreement with anti-government factions in 2003. A new 'Investment Code', along with civil service reforms led to fresh stability that eventually transformed the war-ravaged country. Air transport was essential as

**Robert S. Grant** outlines the history of Canadian Airways Congo, a two aircraft outfit operating in Central Africa.







only 550 miles (886km) of narrow gauge rail existed and bomb-damaged roads made surface travel difficult, especially during the six-month wet season when rainfall could be as much as 79in (201mm).

Husseini finally identified a business

opportunity, but in spite of personal savings and family support, he could not afford to establish an 'upstart' carrier with costly US-built jets. Familiar with Antonovs and Ilyushins, he knew products manufactured beyond the former Iron Curtain sold for lower prices,



*The airline employs 100 staff and more are likely to be added if Dash 8s join the flight line to service the RoC's non-paved airstrips.*

for example, a 1974 An-24RV was listed at \$500,000 and he had observed the types handling the harsh operational environment. He also learned that older Boeing jets, sometimes listed for similar prices, came with frightening operating costs.

"I didn't have much money and the Antonov 24 was a strong aircraft, and if well maintained, would give good service," he recalled. "A Russian friend told me about one ready-to-go with crew so in 2003, I signed a wet lease agreement with the owner."

Husseini's aptitude for understanding complicated documentation served him well while dealing with African aviation authorities. Soon awarded an Aircraft Operating Certificate, he settled on Pointe-Noire as his base.

Indebted to Canada, which had granted him citizenship and paved the way to gather expertise in the aviation industry, Husseini selected Canadian Airways Congo as the name for the fledgling airline. Discussions with the Canadian embassy in nearby Kinshasa confirmed permission to use the name as well as the shorter 'Canair Congo'. "I >>

*Technical Canadian support personnel utilise Pointe Noire to service offshore oil platforms beyond sight of the RoC's sand beaches.*





As long as the RoC's aviation authorities permit, TN-AIX will carry Canadian Airways Congo markings.



At Ouéssou, in northern RoC, crews such as (left to right), Molloumba Ferdinand, Marianna Asaturova, Yevgeny Strelchenko, and Mohammed Atlas enjoy downtime in the exotic native village.



am proud of Canada and everybody knows it is not a country to make war or scare people," Hussein said in his English/French/Lebanese accent.

### First Fleet

A Kyrgyzstan-registered 1975 Antonov 24RV, EX-051 became the first aircraft to bear the Canadian Airways Congo logo. The twin-engine, short-haul airliner was configured

with 52 seats and was capable of carrying 11,020lb (5,000kg) of payload. The company operated the Antonov to many of the unimproved airstrips Hussein experienced during his flights with Société Aéro-Service Afrigo. The time-expired EX-051 needed replacement and another of similar vintage arrived in Pointe-Noire as EX-008 in 2007. Old but well maintained and crewed, both aircraft helped Canadian

Airways Congo move forward with the country's fast growing economy.

Although the Antonovs accounted for the airline's solid results, aviation authorities in Africa had become alarmed at constant accidents and incidents involving Russian-built aircraft and they were soon banned from scheduled service.

Facing possible cease/desist orders, Hussein resolved to enter the jet age sooner than anticipated. After retiring the An-24, he used his Middle East contacts to track down a 727 in Jordan and signed a wet lease contract rather than purchasing the aircraft outright.

The 727-247, registered in Sierra Leone as 9L-LEF, transformed Canadian Airways Congo into a pure jet operator. Amman-based Jordan Aeronautical Systems, an approved maintenance organisation, carried out all inspections. Relentless and determined to become a leader in African aviation, Hussein kept in contact with every individual on the payroll from metal polishers to aircrew. All went well until January 25, 2008 when the one-aircraft airline suffered a severe blow, when a taxiing Antonov 12 suffered brake failure and collided with Canadian Airways Congo's flagship. Ironically, the Antonov had been on lease to Hussein's former employer. No one was injured, but insurance companies declared both aircraft 'damaged beyond repair'.

Again forced into a dilemma, Hussein could either take his profits to malaria-free Montreal or use his hard-earned credentials to find a replacement aircraft. With personal relationships established in Pointe-Noire, he resolved to stay and wet leased a Dubai-based 737-2T5, TN-AIX (c/n 22632), a former United Airlines example that had first flown on August 8, 1967.

The aircraft – configured with 85 seats rather than the stan-

At Ouéssou on the (RoC) and Cameroon border, two tower controllers climb the tower's steps.







dard 119 – was operated to uncontrolled airports like Ouesso, 354 miles (570km) north of Brazzaville, and Impfondo, 388 miles (624km), also north of Brazzaville on the Oubangui River, a tributary of the Congo River. In the interest of safety, Hussein decided that short runways and tropical temperatures at the northern stations necessitated reduced payloads.

Numerous African countries depend on 737-200s for local routes and brief cross border flights, but the offices of Canadian Airways Congo started to learn of moves to ban the type due to noise and airframe cycles. Predicting that TN-AIX could suffer such a fate, Hussein leased a McDonnell-Douglas MD-82, UR-WRE from Wind Rose Aviation Company in Kiev, Ukraine. By September the aircraft had been registered with the Congolese lettering TJ-AJL in Pointe-Noire where Canadian Airways Congo technical director Félicien Mavoungou promptly arranged placement of the company logo on the fuselage.

## Operations

The MD-82 flies solely to Brazzaville, Monday to Saturday with departures from Pointe-Noire at 08.30. The 737, TN-AIX operates to Impfondo and Ouesso's rough and short runways, due to its high performance capability, every Saturday from Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire. Although company managers declined to detail load factors, Hussein said the aircraft fly at 100% capacity despite competition from Congolese national carriers such as Equatorial Congo Airlines and Trans Air Congo. Hussein's enterprise appears to live up to its claim to serve 'tout les quatre coins de Congo' (all corners of the Congo).

Aircrew within the RoC deal with sensitive borders each day in the 132,000sq m (342,000km<sup>2</sup>) country and crossing incidents can occur unexpectedly, especially with overloaded air traffic control units operating without radar. At some airports, personnel unable to understand English cause irksome delays, and whimsically airports are closed by

ABOVE RIGHT • **Gigantic hardwoods generate 10% of Congo's export earnings. Foresters and workers require transportation to non-paved short airstrips and Canadian Airways Congo is likely to meet the increased demand with de Havilland Dash 8s.**

ABOVE • **The Sangha River is an important lifeline for residents of the Congo. Pygmy tribes such as the Bangando and Baka survive in the jungles and attract anthropologists who become regular passengers on Canadian Airways Congo from Pointe Noire or Brazzaville.**

political figures commandeering government aircraft for European shopping trips, elevating stress in flight attendants, passengers and pilots. Six pilots crew the fleet at Canadian Airways Congo and finding staff willing to adjust from more organised environments has not been easy.

"I look first at attitude; if they're the best in the world but have no respect for the country or the people they work with, how can I keep someone like this?" Hussein asked. "Most American or Canadian pilots haven't flown in Africa and those who have an open mind are difficult to find."

Hussein has worked hard to capture loyalty among the nation's four million residents and feedback and internal







**Director of Operations and Flight Training Yevgeniy Strelchenko has 737, 757, and 767 endorsements as well as two Embraer and Challenger 604 type ratings. His wife, chief flight attendant Marianna Asaturova, flies the line daily.**

surveys maintain that Congolese travellers appreciate his airline. Although considered Third World, those who can afford the fares utilise the 737 or MD-82 whenever possible. A bus trip from Brazzaville to Ouésso, for example, takes 12hrs in the dry season and longer during the rains – by air the same journey takes less than one hour. Locals describe Canadian Airways Congo as “Eloko ya peuple” in the native Linguala language (company of the people).

## Republic of the Congo's Future

Petroleum extraction and related support industries already provide major revenue sources for Canadian Airways Congo, but border-to-border geophysical surveys completed in 2013 will undoubtedly reveal new discoveries. Commercial timber harvesters also expect fast crew changes and agricultural products must be moved rapidly. The country's extensive sand shorelines and wildlife viewing enterprises encourage tourist access to remote areas beyond Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire. A recent count revealed only six hard surface runways out of a total of 33 airports with the shortest measuring just 1900ft (579m).

Although Hussein expects Canadian Airways Congo to function flawlessly, he sees an opportunity in the market for twin-engine turboprops capable of handling unimproved airstrips. Studies of the Xi'an Aircraft Industrial Corporation

**Canadian Airways Congo's two-jet fleet shared airports with a Cessna Caravan, N9017M during 2012 and 2013. Operated by Brazilian-owned Asperbras Congo, it was used to carry out geophysical surveys throughout the country.**

**Ali El Hussein misses nothing when it comes to promoting Canadian Airways Congo.**

**Kinshasa, capital of the (DRC) is plagued by violence in spite of peace accords between rebel militia and government troops. A number of businesses are shifting their patronage to the more stable RoC, generating increased traffic for carriers like Canadian Airways Congo.**



MA60, ordered by African carriers such as Cameroon Airlines and Air Burundi have been undertaken, but the Chinese version of the An-24 was not deemed suitable for Canadian Airways Congo.

“Who will fly it? The Chinese?” Hussein asked. “Translation difficulties lead to misunderstanding of systems and consequently, miscommunication could affect our safety record.”

Canada's de Havilland Dash 8 has exceeded the aviation industry's expectations for reliability since it took to the

air for the first time on June 20, 1983. Finding crew and maintenance experts experienced on the type would be easier since at least 1,125 models, including the Dash 8-Q400, have been produced by Bombardier since December 2013.

## Here to Stay

Today, Canadian Airways Congo's position in the Central West African transportation scene is promising. Across the famous Congo River, in sight of Brazzaville's business district, the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) propensity for coup attempts and uncontrollable militia as well as its reputation as one of the most violent capitals of the world has deterred investors. Congo-Brazzaville, on the other hand, enjoys religious stability, no civil unrest and a president determined to maintain peace. Observers believe Brazzaville's Maya-Maya International Airport stands poised to become a major hub in the region.

Hussein makes no promises that widebody A380s or 787 Dreamliners will carry the ‘Canadian’ call sign, but for the present he intends to concentrate on keeping ahead of his numerous challengers in the Congo. Clients clearly support him: full seats indicate appreciation of the garrulous informal airline president who stands at the boarding stairs of TN-AIX and TJ-AJL. He makes no apologies for his love of the RoC and he intends to stay, regardless of what the future holds. **W**

