

Regarding Air Service to Rotuma

Pacific Sun will have a lot to answer for their irregular air services to Rotuma.

Firstly, if there is a government subsidy available for the airline to access when payloads are below break even costs to run the aircraft, then the airline should run the regular service barring genuine weather concerns and mechanical and/or technical problems to the aircraft. Unfortunately being the only domestic service provider the airline will be inclined to service routes that are profitable. These are routes servicing the tourist belt in the west and other short haul services within Fiji.

Secondly, I am amazed that the airline can book and confirm 12 passengers on a twin otter to Rotuma, especially as I understand Rotuma does not have facilities to refuel the aircraft. Where I currently work in PNG we have a weekly charter service on a twin otter aircraft (same type of aircraft servicing Rotuma) for a 1 hour and 50 minutes flight and the most the aircraft can carry is 2 pilots and 8 passengers with limited cargo. This is due to weight restrictions such that the aircraft must have sufficient fuel to return to its departure destination in case of unfavourable weather conditions enroute and at the arrival destination. The airline would be irresponsible knowing that they cannot carry 12 passengers in any one sector and to accept paid fares for months in advance from prospective travellers.

Previous inquiries with Pacific Sun reveal a special charter will cost approximately \$20,000FJD return trip with passenger numbers in the range of four to six each way plus freight. For normal air service to Rotuma a fare of \$650 each way is not profitable given that a charter rate is set at \$20,000FJD return trip. Even when weather conditions are suitable for the aircraft to operate strong head winds may limit the carrying capacity of the aircraft to as low as four passengers each way; this may explain the withdrawal of services to Rotuma at very short notice due to weather or mechanical breakdowns. For a charter service the charge would have to be \$1600 per person for a maximum of 12 people on the return sector to recover the cost of the charter.

Our prospective politicians and leaders of Rotuma need to lobby the government to find ways to upgrade the airstrip in Rotuma so bigger aircraft can service the island without limiting the number of passengers the aircraft can carry. Whilst this service can be weekly or fortnightly it will guarantee the airline a profit and travellers would be happy.

PNG is a country solely dependent on air and sea transport to service the entire country and I must say you have not seen the chaos when air services are withdrawn at short notice. The current airfare to and from Rotuma, and the type of aircraft being used on the route, makes you wonder how long before Pacific Sun withdraws the service or worse still, that the status quo remains, with cancelled flights at short notice and disgruntled passengers each time a flight is scheduled for Rotuma.

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