

Beneath South Pacific skies

Michael Magnusson charts the recent evolution of Air Chatham, which operates regional services across New Zealand and islands of the South Pacific

Air Chatham was founded in 1984 by Craig Emeny and his wife, Marion, to provide a connecting air service for the Chatham Islands, located around 500 miles southwest of New Zealand. He had first moved to the archipelago when offered a job as a young pilot, operating services to the adjacent Pitt Island. In the early

1980s there was no regular service between the Chatham Islands and New Zealand, which prompted Emeny to start his own airline.

The company began flying live crayfish (lobster) to the mainland where they could achieve five times the market price of those processed on Chatham Island. Passengers would soon follow and, four decades later,

the business remains a family affair with Emeny operating as CEO and Marion as CFO; and their sons Duane and Matthew as COO and head of flight operations, respectively. Emenys aside, the carrier employs around 170 staff and operates a fleet of 11 aircraft.

The first aircraft was a twin-engine Cessna 337 Skymaster, ZK-TAI (c/n 33701456), purchased from Air



Rarotonga on the Cook Islands and capable of carrying five passengers. The airline has operated a handful of types, including eight Fairchild Swearingen Metroliners and seven Convair CV-580s. Over 25 years, the 580s became the mainstay of the fleet and when the last aircraft was retired in August 2022 it was the final commercial operator to do so. One example, the 1953-built ZK-CIB (c/n 327A), remains on display at the National Toy and Transport Museum in Wānaka. The Convair suited the carrier, having quick change cabins that made the passenger to cargo transition swift. They offered excellent payload range and speed, but with a high fuel burn and varying cockpit configurations – yet the pilots loved them.

In 2005, the airline jumped at the opportunity to fly chilled tuna 800 miles from Niue, across the South Pacific to Fiji, but Reef Air – as the enterprise was known – lasted just a few weeks because the Fijian government refused to sanction passenger flights. Chatham Pacific was formed in 2008 to operate domestic routes for the Tongan government, but in 2012 the government changed its mind and established Real Tonga, which forced the closure of Chatham Pacific and ended the adventure.

Today, Air Chatham carries approximately 100,000 passengers per year with a load factor close to 70%, operating most of its services with a pair of ATR 72-500s and six Saab 340s. The modern fleet also includes a Rockwell 690A Turbo Commander, ZK-PVB (c/n 11321) purchased in 2016 and used for corporate flying. The airline also operates a 28-seat, 1944 Douglas DC-3, ZK-AWP (c/n 33135) *Kaitia* in a classic National Airways Corporation livery, which Emeny uses for scenic flights – an aircraft that still has the capacity to make people stop and wave as it passes. The final aircraft in the fleet is a solitary six-seater Cessna 206, ZK-KMH (c/n 2060-4075) servicing Pitt Island, 20 miles south of Chatham Island. With a population of less than 50 people, flights to the remote grass airstrip are by request, with rotations operated by a local, Chatham-based pilot. Over the years it's been a troublesome destination, and the company has lost two Cessnas beyond economic repair but without serious injury, due to the challenges created by the weather and the grass runway.

ATRs

As the Convair CV-580s began to edge closer to retirement, the carrier purchased a pair of 68-seat ATR 72-500s from Air New Zealand, with ZK-MCO (c/n 628) arriving in February 2019 and ZK-MCU (c/n 632) following in May 2022. These aircraft handle most of the passenger flights between the mainland and the islands. A typical schedule for an ATR and its crew is: Monday from Auckland to Chatham; Tuesday to Wellington and back; Wednesday to Christchurch and back; Thursday to Wellington and back; and Friday from Chatham to Auckland. The ATRs are typically configured with passengers and some cargo in seat bags, which can make loading and unloading time consuming even though loaders often fly with the aircraft. If passenger demand spikes at weekends the ATRs

will sometimes supplement the Saab routes on the mainland.

For approximately half the year, during the summer season, one of the ATRs will operate charter services around Australia carrying American tourists, or flying the sole international route to Norfolk Island. The 14 square mile Australian territory is located 900 miles east of Brisbane and jokingly referred to as a 'newly wed, almost dead' destination, being popular with young couples getting married and older retired >>

MAIN IMAGE: *Saab 340, ZK-CIZ (c/n 357), taxiing for departure on at Auckland in June 2018* AIRTEAMIMAGES.COM/COLIN HUNTER





people. With scheduled maintenance, each of the ATRs accumulates around 1,100 hours each year.

Challenges

One operational challenge is the long flight from the islands to the mainland, almost entirely across the South Pacific within the latitudes of the Roaring Forties (a region of strong winds in the Southern Hemisphere). Auckland is 690 miles and 2hrs 25mins away, while Christchurch is 520 miles and 2hrs distant and Wellington 460 miles and 1hr 45mins. With no alternative airport along the route, the aircraft must carry enough fuel for a return flight from the mainland to the islands. Sometimes, surplus fuel is removed from the aircraft at Chatham Islands/Tuuta airport and stored in a local fuel depot. Aircraft are equipped with the latest GPS navigation and high frequency communication to ensure reliable contact during flights.

The Roaring Forties location makes the islands susceptible to strong winds and

icy blasts and, although snow is rare, sleet and hail are common. Over time, pilots become highly accomplished at crosswind landings on the 6,070ft runway 05/23 at Chatham Islands/Tuuta. Modern real-time weather forecasts make the task easier, but if conditions are marginal the airline tends to cancel the flight. The preferred approach is with GPS, but non-directional beacons (NDBs) are also used.

Saab

The first of the airline's six Saab 340s arrived on August 2, 2016, from local operator Kiwi Regional Air, to be used on services to Whanganui. The arrival of ZK-KRA (c/n 065) proved opportunistic as Kiwi Regional Air had just ceased operations and Air New Zealand had withdrawn from Whanganui Airport, leaving Air Chathams as the sole operator on the Auckland route. Two more Saabs would follow, with ZK-CIY (c/n 135) and ZK-CIZ (c/n 357) delivered on

January 24, 2018, although the former would subsequently undergo a quick change cargo reconfiguration.

As New Zealand's legacy carrier withdrew its regular service between Kapiti Coast and Auckland, Air Chathams moved in to secure another mainland market. The inaugural service on August 20, 2018, was flown by Emeny and his son Duane in ZK-CIZ and currently operates daily. Kapiti Coast is about an hour north of Wellington and attracts people from the northern suburbs who prefer this bijou facility to Wellington airport, south of the city.

With the phasing out of the Fairchild Metroliner fleet, the carrier purchased four 340s from the Australian carrier, Rex Airlines. ZK-CIX (c/n 085) and ZK-CIW (c/n 008), both of which are cargo conversions, arrived in June 2023. While the former is currently parked at Auckland in Rex's livery, the latter entered service in August 2024. ZK-CIT (c/n 155) was delivered in July 2023 and also entered service in August 2024.

ABOVE LEFT: *Fairchild Swearingen Metroliner, ZK-CID (c/n AC-692B) first took to the skies in October 1987, joining Air Chathams on April 8, 2016, finally departing on June 14, 2024 – the last of its kind to leave New Zealand*
AIRTEAMIMAGES.COM/
ROLF JONSEN

BELOW: *Boarding ATR 72-500, ZK-MCO (c/n 628) at Chatham Islands/Tuuta airport*
MICHAEL MAGNUSSON



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The fourth aircraft, VH-KDK (c/n 016) was never delivered as it was damaged beyond repair on a flight from Wagga Wagga to Charleville in April 2023 after an electrical fire broke out in the cabin. After diverting to Cobar it was parked then parted out, with Air Chathams filling a container with spares.

With ZK-CIY, ZK-CIZ and ZK-KRA, the operational 340 fleet totals six aircraft, each of which flies for around 1,300 hours per year. All the Saab maintenance, including C-checks, takes place in-house at the carrier's Auckland facility, where just under 25 maintenance staff are employed.

The airline plans to maintain five 340s in service, with a cargo aircraft allocated to a daily Chatham-Wellington service, ferrying high-



Aboard ZK-KRA with its one-two seating configuration MICHAEL MAGNUSSON

Air Chathams fleet

Type	Reg	c/n	Built	Delivery Date
ATR 72	ZK-MCO	628	1999	02/2019
ATR 72	ZK-MCU	632	2000	05/2022
Saab 340	ZK-CIT	155	1989	07/2023
Saab Fairchild 340	ZK-CIW	008	1984	06/2023
Saab 340	ZK-CIX	085	1987	06/2023
Saab 340QC	ZK-CIY	135	1988	01/2018
Saab 340	ZK-CIZ	357	1994	01/2018
Saab 340QC	ZK-KRA	065	1986	08/2016
Cessna 206	ZK-KMH	2060-4075	1978	
Rockwell 690A Turbo Commander	ZK-PVB	11321		2016
Douglas DC-3	ZK-AWP	33135	1944	09/2010

value seafood, primarily for the Chinese market. Cargo accounts for approximately 15% of the total company revenue. The pair of passenger aircraft and the two quick-change examples are focused on routes to the north island of New Zealand: Kapiti Coast, Whanganui and Whakatāne.

Operations

The airline employs around 40 pilots, roughly divided into 'long-timers' >>

TOP: *Convair CV-580, ZK-CIB (c/n 327A), arriving at Wellington in April 2010, is now on display at the National Toy and Transport Museum in Wānaka* AIRTEAMIMAGES.COM/ SIMON WILLSON

ABOVE: *Douglas DC-3, ZK-AWP (c/n 33135) operates various charter and scenic flights from Auckland* AIR CHATHAMS



“The airline employs around 40 pilots, roughly divided into ‘long-timers’ and ‘hour-builders’ depending on whether they like flying locally or plan to move on to a larger airline”

and ‘hour-builders’ depending on whether they like flying locally or plan to move on to a larger airline such as Air New Zealand. Most are based on the mainland, with only one senior pilot, Captain Darryn Kyle, living on Chatham. The same can be said of the cabin crew, with only a few living on the islands. New Zealand has a scheme where young pilots can be loaned NZ\$100,000 (£47,000) to pay for training in order to build up the required 250 hours. Air Chathams has a policy to start potential pilots from scratch, employing them on ground-based ramp jobs. Once they have accrued their 250 hours they can fly the Cessna, and after 500 hours they can fly the right-hand seat in either the Saab or the ATR. The closest simulators for the ATR are in New Zealand; for the Saab it is Australia.

The Chatham Islands have a population of just over 700 people, of whom one is a doctor who can initiate medical flights to the mainland, financed by the government. Another resident is the police officer whose role rotates every four years. There is a primary school, but secondary education is on the mainland, which helps generate year-round passengers for the airline. Post-education, the local economy is driven mainly by fishing, agriculture and tourism. Aside from air travel, transportation is via a small ship,



owned by the local trust, that can ferry cars, livestock, hazardous cargo, fuel for local generators and passengers. The service to the mainland takes up to two days, but the ship is currently being repaired, which has created some issues for islanders.

The first airfield on Chatham Island was on the coast at Hapupu, but the grass runway was only suited to Douglas DC-3s and Bristol 170 Freighters, which sometimes got stuck in the mud. The hard surface at Chatham Islands/Tuuta was completed in 1982 and services moved to the new facility. Further improvements to the airport and a 2023 runway extension have allowed the airline to consider purchasing a Boeing 737-300 to improve its capacity for both passenger and freight movements.

Flying forward

At Auckland and Wellington, services operate from the domestic terminal, where the airline also handles its own check-in and loading. Passengers can arrive 30 minutes before departure and there are no security checks. The author sampled flights to Chatham Island and from Kapiti Coast. On a Saab 340 flight from Kapiti Coast to Auckland, the author was introduced to 70-year-old captain Craig Steele, a long-time employee and former



LEFT: *Air Chatham's current route map*
ANDY ONEIL


FAR LEFT: *ZK-KRA on approach to runway 23L at Auckland*
MICHAEL MAGNUSSON

BOTTOM FAR LEFT: *Duane (left) and Craig Emery*
MICHAEL MAGNUSSON

BELOW: *Captain Craig Steele (left), a long time employee of the airline and former Convair pilot, is still flying the Saab 340 at 70 years of age*
MICHAEL MAGNUSSON

Convair captain. He revealed New Zealand pilots can fly regional passenger aircraft beyond the usual age limit of 65, as long as the pilot passes the necessary medical exams.

Since COVID-19, costs for Air Chatham have increased by over 30% while fares have climbed only 9%, presenting the carrier with some challenges, yet it remains the only independent regional carrier in New Zealand offering capacity in the 30-70 seat range. Air Milford, based in Queenstown, operates sightseeing flights with its three Cessna 208 Caravans and solitary Cessna 185, while Wellington-based Sounds Air operates four Cessna 208 Caravans and six Pilatus PC-12s on scheduled mainland routes.

For a nation of about 100,000 square miles and just over five million inhabitants, mostly spread across two main islands, flying is important to New Zealand. Subsidies for regional operators have been discussed but not implemented, which differs from US and European operators in rural areas. Being small, nimble and able to stand on its own two feet, Air Chatham should have an interesting future ahead. Despite overtures from interested parties, the airline remains family-owned, with the Emerys keen to keep control of their own destiny. 

Airport	Route
Chatham/Tuuta	Auckland, Christchurch, Pitt Island, Wellington
Pitt Island	Chatham/Tuuta
Auckland	Chatham/Tuuta, Kapiti Coast, Norfolk Island, Whakatane, Whanganui

