

LIAT: Mistreating Customers and Harming Dominica

We love Dominica and have since we first visited in 1987. After that voyage of discovery we returned numerous times while we were still in our working years and we began to plan to eventually live in Dominica upon our retirement. We made friends in Dominica, some of whom visited us as guests in our home when we still lived in the United States. In 2004 we were able to buy a small house lot here and in 2005 we had a small vacation lodge built on it. We were able to expand the lodge into a 2-bedroom ground floor apartment in 2006 and in 2008 when we were finally able to retire we sold our house in the US and complete our retirement home above the apartment, a lovely 3-bedroom villa.

Coming from and going to the US, which we do frequently because our daughter still lives there, we used to use American Eagle between Dominica and San Juan. When American Eagle announced it was quitting the route and LIAT picked it up we initially had hope that LIAT would correct the biggest problem with American Eagle; namely, the stupid early departure from San Juan that forces travelers from the US to waste their money and time in overnight Puerto Rico. But that hope for change was not to be, and should have forewarned us that LIAT cared neither for its customers nor for Dominica.

Then on August 8 we began a truly awful experience with LIAT that showed us the company's true colors.

My wife had made arrangements to fly to the US starting with LIAT to San Juan to meet a connecting flight. We arrived at Melville Hall Airport 1½ hours before flight time, which was also 1½ hours after the airport opened in the morning. But the LIAT plane, which was not to depart for another 90 minutes was sitting on the tarmac already full. My wife and another woman reserved passenger were coldly told by the LIAT desk clerk that the flight had been overbooked.

We informed the clerk that my wife had a connecting flight to catch in San Juan. It was to have been a 5-hour flight. The clerk got onto her computer and suggested we make other arrangements for the next day, using the same connecting airline and taking an 11-hour flight. There were no flights connecting to her destination that day. Instead of taking the clerk's ridiculous suggestion, we called the airline we had hoped to connect on and were able to rebook the same flight she had missed, but for the next day. But we were charged a US\$150 change fee and US\$170 additional airfare, a total of US\$320, *caused by LIAT having overbooked.*

The LIAT clerk told us that we would have no problem obtaining payment of US\$320 from LIAT. All we had to do, she told us, was go to LIAT through its web site or call LIAT on the phone from home and tell LIAT about the problem. That is when we discovered that *simply ignores people.*

The LIAT web site gives a toll-free US number. We have a magicJack phone that allows to use US numbers, so we called that number several times, with the same result: After several unanswered rings

the phone goes to an error signal. The LIAT web site also gives a number in Antigua, but either a magicJack or LIME cell phone call to it would cost too much to make, especially if one must wait on hold. But the LIAT web site also gives a toll-free number for use from Puerto Rico and we found that our magicJack could call that number. That number is answered by an automated system that typically forces the caller to hold for over 15 minutes. (Imagine the cost if you're not using a magicJack to call!)

Finally, I reached some at LIAT on the phone. I tried to tell her about our problem. She did not want to hear. She simply told us that we had to send an e-mail to LIAT Customer Relations.

We quickly learned why LIAT probably calls what other airlines call "Customer Service" "Customer Relations" instead. It is because LIAT does not provide customers with any service. It instead has "relations" with them in a figurative sense, if you take my meaning.

My e-mail to LIAT and several follow-up e-mail messages to LIAT went un-answered. So I figured I would write to LIAT by actual letter. I could not find an address (although there is one fairly hidden in small print on the web site), so I tried to get one by calling. After the usual 15-minute hold I reached a human being. I asked her for the LIAT business address and *she hung up on me!*

So I drove to Melville Hall Airport and asked the LIAT desk personnel for the company's address. Incredibly, they *told me they did not know it* even when I asked them what address was on their paychecks. But one of them let slip the information that LIAT has an office at the airport.

LIAT on Dominica tries to hide from the public. The telephone book lists no office on Dominica for LIAT. But LIAT has an office in the wooden building adjacent to the terminal. However, *it has no sign, blacked out windows, and a locked door.* I knocked and gained entry and the employee there reluctantly gave me a business address for LIAT. (Don't bother writing. Doing so is useless. I wrote to both addresses. *Neither letter received any reply.*)

My letters and e-mails told LIAT about my problem, demanded LIAT pay us the US\$320 it had cost us, and warned them that I would do my utmost to publicize this matter if we did not get our money within one month.

A week ago, still not having heard from LIAT I returned to the LIAT Melville Hall Airport office. On that trip I made certain to write down the names of the people I met there or was told about. And I also gave the secretary who was there a note about our problem with a repeat of my warning.

For your information, not only LIAT itself, but also its employees hide from customers. I had learned of a LIAT office employee from people in my village and got his phone number from his sister. His name is Raymond Warrington and his phone number is 275-7624. But he will not answer calls from anyone he does not know. He also will not return calls or answer text messages. He won't even reply to messages left for him on Facebook! And LIAT has an office manager, Mr. Gerald Cools-Latrigue. His number listed in the phone book is out of service. But his office number is 448-3985. (*Good luck trying to reach him!*)

By the time I reached home and happened to check my e-mail, there was a message from LIAT. But all it did, *at last*, was acknowledge my original e-mail to LIAT by reply. It advised me to "be patient", but did

not give any indication of how long we must wait for redress. I e-mailed back and nearly immediately received a reply e-mail that was no different in content. I therefore replied with a repeat of my warning that I would make the matter as public as possible if we were not given US\$320 by September 7.

LIAT has become adept, and tiresome, at writing to news outlets asking for patience. Well, the public is ready and willing to forgive problems that may be beyond LIAT's control, such as bad weather, some reasonable amount of equipment breakdowns, or certain airport conditions. *But LIAT's rudeness and bad behavior can't be condoned or forgiven.* LIAT has only itself to blame.

If you check Wikipedia's entry for LIAT you will see that it notes that LIAT is noted for surly, unhelpful employees, poor service, and frequently missed flight schedules.

There is potential good news. LIAT has some competition from Seaborne Airlines, Air Sunshine, and soon will also from Hummingbird Airway. But they are all small, fly infrequently, and with low-capacity craft. In the future we will try to use them, not LIAT.

There have recently been unpleasant news stories about thefts and robberies, and even assaults and rapes in Dominica. We all know that those stories at least give prospective tourists pause about visiting the Nature Island, and either won't come, or having come decide to never return – *and warn others away.* This harms Dominica's economy. And LIAT makes it worse because *people are learning that LIAT may very well rob you coming and/or going!*

But for now, Dominica and people are being rudely mistreated by LIAT. This must stop!

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