



1 PHOTO: AUTHOR

Seawings: Seaplanes over Dubai

Story by LUIGI VALLERO

Dubai's longstanding relationship with seaplanes dates back to October 1937. It was then that Imperial Airways (*Airways*, April, May, June 2015) started regularly using sheikdoms allied with Great Britain—called the Trucial States—as intermediate stops for the Empire Route connecting the UK with India.

THE FIRST WEEKLY scheduled flight—Alexandria, Egypt, to Calcutta—landed at Sharjah's Al Mahatta airport. The plane: a Handley Page HP-42 G-AAXC dubbed *Hanno*.

To help extend the Empire air routes, the airline launched a seaplane service bound to Australia using the faster and larger four-engine

Shorts Empire C Class flying boats. The giant seaplanes used Dubai Creek as their port of call, starting a 'dual airport' strategy: the landplanes used Sharjah airport and the seaplanes the nearby Dubai Creek.

The Imperial flying boat service hopped from Southampton to Sydney on an incredible 10-day marathon. The itinerary was like a geography quiz, with stops at Marseilles, Rome, Brindisi, Athens, Alexandria, Tiberias, Habbaniya, Basra, Bahrain, Dubai, Karachi, Raj Samand, Gwalior, Allahabad, Calcutta, Akyab, Rangoon, Bangkok, Penang, Singapore, Batavia, Surabaya, Kupang, Darwin, Karumba, Townsville, Gladstone, and Brisbane.

The trip was the epitome of luxury travel reserved for the top elite of society, and included adventurous side trips and overnight stays at legendary hotels.

By August 1938, Dubai had established itself as a regular stop on the UK – Australia route, with no fewer than six seaplanes a week (three eastbound and three westbound) landing on the waters of Dubai Creek. There, at the permanent jetty built on its Deira side, the planes moored and passengers disembarked.

Travelers would make their way to the Sharjah Fort and Hotel, where they would spend the night while supplies were loaded on their planes. Back then, Dubai was a small desert outpost with no electricity, concrete buildings or paved roads. Goats and camels wandered around with the curious onlookers.

The next year, Imperial Airways morphed into BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation) and the area became known as the BOAC Jetty. In effect, it was Dubai's first commercial airport, though it was nothing more than a simple pier with a concrete strip for loading supplies and transporting passengers.

Yet as quickly as they emerged, seaplanes disappeared amid World War II. In 1947, after 10 years of regular operations, the BOAC Flying Boat Service came to a complete stop, replaced by newer landplanes and the development of land airports. The change spelled the end of what, only a few years earlier, was believed the future of air travel.

While Dubai quickly grew into the metropolis we know today, the BOAC Jetty sat abandoned for decades, until finally being demolished in the 1980s. The new Dubai International Airport, which opened on September 30, 1960, less than 3 miles (5km) from the Creek, grew into the aerial hub that is now a center of global air travel.



2 PHOTO: PENDING

THE SEAPLANES' COMEBACK

It was not until 2004 that a seaplane would return to Dubai. It was then that a restored and re-engined version of the Dornier Do 24 ATT landed in anticipation of what was to follow at the Creek location. The flight was commanded by Iren Dornier, grandson of aircraft-maker Dr. Claude Dornier, and recreated the historic feat performed by his grandfather, who had flown around the globe in a similar plane in 1929.

The idea of launching a new and different sightseeing venture in Dubai was the brainchild of Stuart Wheeler, Air Charter International's founder and CEO. He was following examples set in Australia and Canada, where seaplanes had been a common proposition for travel and tourism for some time.

Wheeler established Seawings in August 2007, investing his own and shareholders' capital. The new venture would offer seaplane aerial tours, scenic flights, and charters, and envisaged, in the longer term, scheduled service from Dubai to destinations in the United Arab Emirates and Oman, such as Abu Dhabi, Ras Al Khaimah, Fujairah, and the Musandam peninsula.



3 PHOTO: AUTHOR



4 PHOTO: AUTHOR

1 Taking off from the calm waters of Dubai creek is part of the fun factor when flying on Seawings.

2 Al Mahatta Airport in Sharjah was once used as one of the many intermediate stops for Imperial Airways' legendary Handley page HP-42s.

3 Check-in and safety briefing are courteously performed by friendly staff inside Dubai Creek Golf Academy's clubhouse.

4 Awaiting its next passenger load, A6-SEB floats moored at Dubai Creek Seaplane Base (DCC).

/ airline review /

The idea was to whisk passengers at a panoramic altitude of 1,500ft (450m) for views of the city's skyline and landmarks in a comfortable aircraft, operated by Jet-Ops FZE, a Dubai-based company and holder of a UAE AOC (Air Operators Certificate). At that time, it was difficult for visitors to Dubai to appreciate the extent of the development of the emirate, so the new venture gave travelers the chance to savor a new perspective.

In practical terms, Seawings is actually a subsidiary of Jet-Ops FZE, which handles all the marketing and commercial activities of the carrier. The Cessna 208 Amphibian Caravans that make up its fleet have proved to be reliable workhorses—aircraft that can land on both water and land, while keeping their



STOL (Short Takeoff and Landing) capabilities, enabling the airline to operate on small stretches of water. That capacity has allowed the company to open up dozens of locations across the UAE.

The high-quality cabin boasts a smart-looking nine-passenger interior by BMW Design, featuring sports car-like cream leather seats, a large and comfortable twin seating 'couch' arrangement at the back of the cabin for Premium seating, and a coveted co-Pilot seat, enabling one lucky passenger to enjoy the views upfront.



TAKING A FLIGHT

My first experience with Seawings took place back in May 2008, when I had the chance to get my first panoramic glimpse of the Arabian metropolis by air.

I was on a sightseeing flight from the original Seawings departure spot at Jebel Ali Golf Resort's Club, located about 25 miles (40km) west of downtown Dubai. We had an exciting takeoff from the sea, then flew low over the Palm Jebel Ali archipelago before setting course to the east. We flew over the Dubai Marina, the Palm Jumeirah and the Atlantis resort, the Burj Al Arab and Jumeirah hotels, and the artificial World archipelago before reversing course and heading back to Jebel Ali, passing over the Emirates Towers and Burj Dubai.

Eight years later, on a business trip to Dubai in April, I had a chance to meet again with Mithu Agarwal, Seawings' Commercial Manager. From him, I learned that the company carried 30,000

5 The BMW-designed interior of the Caravan offers a comfortable and stylish environment for Seawings passengers.

6 One of the passengers on each Seawings flight has the added thrill of occupying the co-pilot seat.

7 Jet-OPS is the actual operator of the Seawings fleet.

8 Scenic flights over Dubai afford breathtaking low-level sights of the Arabian metropolis' iconic landmarks.

9 Busy times at Dubai Creek's mooring, with 'EB' and 'EC' awaiting their next tourist loads.

passengers to 27 approved destinations across the UAE and Oman in 2015. That's success, especially when you consider that each flight can carry only nine passengers.

Today, Seawings offers comprehensive tours for breathtaking views of all the Dubai landmarks. Its Air Cruise Holidays combine seaplane travel with stays in five-star resorts across the UAE. Seawings also works with major real estate developer Nakheel to whisk potential customers directly to new island projects under development.

Even though Seawings continues to use its original Jebel Ali location as one of its departure points, most operations have now been centralized at the much more convenient Dubai Creek Seaplane Base (DGC), close to the old location of the BOAC Jetty. It's only a 10-minute taxi ride from Dubai International Airport (DXB), enabling passengers arriving at the major Emirati airport to reach their final destinations without facing the city's notorious traffic jams.

The Seawings Terminal is located in the Dubai Creek Golf Academy, facing the Park Hyatt Hotel and literally in the shadow of the iconic sail-shaped Dubai Creek Golf Clubhouse. There, passengers can quickly check in. In the waiting lounge, they receive a detailed safety briefing and a preliminary commentary detailing the flight experience and the sights of the tour. Just as with any commercial airline, tight security is enforced, and passengers must produce their passports and undergo security checks before boarding.

When the flight is ready to depart, passengers ride a 10-seat golf cart to the jetty where the Caravans are moored. With up to 16 seaplane take-offs and landings a day, the old creek seaplane base is being used far more than it ever was in its Imperial Airways heyday. On the morning I visited, Seawings had scheduled no fewer than five scenic flights within two hours from CDG, all with 100% load factors, predominantly tourist groups from China and Spain.



9 PHOTO: AUTHOR

The airline achieved a major milestone last April, when it finally launched scheduled service from DCG to Abu Dhabi's Yas Island (AYM) and Sir Bani Yas Island, as well as to Ras-al-Khaimah Al Hamra (RHR).

So far, these scheduled services fly five times a week to AYM—this is good for businessmen, as the jetty's location enables quick access to downtown Abu Dhabi. The more leisure-oriented destinations of RHR and Sir Bani Yas Island are usually reached twice weekly, around the weekend. The airline expects to increase the frequency to daily service once the demand increases. All scheduled flights are operated in the morning. The carrier is now eyeing Oman, which is currently attracting visitors with its natural beauty, and to Muscat, the country's capital city.

Although the Caravans are suitable for current operations, the airline is contemplating upgrading its fleet to larger and faster equipment, such as Viking Air's Twin Otters, as more destinations come online.

The company currently employs a total staff of 80, with Pilots mainly from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. They are among the world's most skilled at flying seaplanes. Along with them are approximately 20 ground/sea staff, who make sure that every detail is taken into account. Heavy maintenance is performed in the extremely hot summer months, when demand is lower and aircraft can be taken out of service.

Seawings is still a young company, but has proven in a short time that the market niche it had identified actually exists. Motivated by strong ambitions and performing at a level that has earned it the accolade of 'Number 1 thing to do in Dubai' by *The New York Times*, it is very much determined to expand and succeed.

Seaplanes look to be an increasingly common sight in this part of the world for many years to come. 🛩️