



Riviera Gem: St Tropez-La Môle Airport

report & photography by Luigi Vallero

Salubrious southern France, with its scenic beauty, pleasant weather, relaxed way of life, and charming towns and villages, has long been popular with vacationers and affluent residents alike. Contributing to that reputation is Saint-Tropez in the PACA (Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur) region, a charming fishing village situated on the tip of a peninsula surrounded by azure seas, which was popularized in the Sixties by the 'beautiful people'.

Access to the area is usually via such airports as Nice-Côte d'Azur (IATA: NCE/ICAO: LFMN—*Airways* January 2003), Toulon-Hyères (TLN/LFTH), and Marseille-Provence (MRS/LFML)—along with Cannes-Mandelieu (CEQ/LFMD), which caters for general and business aviation. But after landing at one of these gateways,

passengers face a road trip which, depending on the time of year, can take a considerable amount of time. For example, during the summer peak, the 130km (80mi) journey along the coastal road from Nice to St Tropez can take more than four hours because of extremely heavy traffic.





In 1966, an airfield with a single grass strip was built near the village of La Môle—approximately 10km (6mi) to the west of the Golfe de St-Tropez, along the road to Toulon—by the family of the mother of French aviation legend Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, giving easy access to a fortunate few.

François André, director of Aéroport de La Môle, explains to *Airways* that in its early years the airfield served mainly as a home to the local aero club. But in the mid-Eighties a newly created airport authority, Aéroport du Golfe de Saint-Tropez (AGST), in close cooperation with local communities, embarked on an ambitious project to upgrade the airfield and operate it as a private enterprise to the benefit of both general aviation and commercial air transport.

AGST's mission was to serve the dozen municipalities that constitute the Pays de Saint-Tropez et de la Corniche des Maures, comprising some 60,000 residents—a number that reaches almost 600,000 during the summer



The 750m² (8,000sq ft) terminal has a capacity for 40,000 passengers a year. There is a comfortable waiting hall and modest versions of the basic amenities found at any international airport.



François André, director of Aéroport de La Môle since June 2005, with almost the entire staff of the airport. He previously held a similar position at Le Castellet (CTT/LFMQ), the airfield that serves the motor racing circuit of the same name in southern France.

months. The runway was extended and paved, and a passenger terminal building constructed.

La Môle's geographical location, nestled in a narrowing valley with rising wooded hills known as Les Maures associated with the local prevailing winds—the Mistral often blows there, sometimes producing crosswinds—requires particular skills when landing. Indeed, pilots flying into the airport are required to have operated there in the previous 24 months. Alternatively, they must carry out a familiarization flight with a local instructor or have mountain experience—at airports like Courchevel in the French Alps or Saanen (Switzerland)—before being allowed to use the airport. For aircraft weighing over 5.7t (12,600lb), a specific certification is mandatory.

Because of steeply rising terrain at the short runway's western end, larger aircraft operating into La Môle can land only on Runway 24, with takeoffs in the reciprocal direction. To facilitate deceleration after landing, the asphalt-surfaced runway has a high-friction top layer. La Môle is currently certified for use by most general



Rotary wing regulars at La Môle include Heli Air Monaco—this is a Eurocopter EC130B4—and Nice Hélicoptères.

aviation aircraft, business jets up to Dassault Falcon 50 size, and regional aircraft in the ATR42, SAAB 340/2000, and Bombardier Dash 8-300 category (certification for larger bizjets, such as the Falcon 900/2000 series is under evaluation). Normal operating hours are 0700 to 1900, or until sunset in the summer by special request.

Regular summer-only scheduled operations began in 1997, with Crossair offering flights from Geneva [Genève] and Zürich with SAAB 340s (a service continued for a while after Crossair became Swiss International



Flybaboo is the airport's sole scheduled operator, providing service with 50-seat Dash 8-300s from Geneva.

Air Lines). Augsburg Airways (Lufthansa CityLine) flew briefly to St-Tropez from Munich [München] with Bombardier Dash 8-100s. Another short-lived service was operated from Nice in 2002 by Airlinair on behalf of Air France, using ATR42s.

Since June 2004, however, Flybaboo has been the major regular operator at La Môle—taking over where Swiss left off—and providing up to four flights a week from Geneva during the peak season (June–September) with Dash 8-300s.

Currently, the terminal is capable of handling 50 to 60 passengers per hour, and up to 80 daily movements—including general aviation and helicopters.

Contributing to the relaxed feel of the airport are pleasant landscaping, which includes ancient shady trees, and the 'Le Jardin' café/restaurant, as well as an overall level of service aimed specifically at the wealthier clientele that characterizes most of this airport's users.

A team of 14 regular employees—increased by four or five between May and October—assist M André in ensuring that the airport runs smoothly. One unusual service provided to general aviation customers is a car valet service, whereby the traveller may drive to the aircraft, the vehicle then being taken care of by airport staff until the owner's return.

Similarly, all passengers on regular scheduled flights receive VIP treatment, with late check-in and personalized service. During the *Airways* visit, a Flybaboo Bombardier Dash 8-300 from Geneva [Genève] was turned around in less than 17 minutes, with a couple of late passengers allowed to board while M André himself helped to deliver a trolley with their luggage to the waiting airplane.

This is typical of the team spirit at La Môle, an airport whose understated elegance and style distinguishes it as a small jewel in the crown of the French Riviera. ➔

(Airways thanks François André, director of Aéroport International Saint-Tropez - La Môle, for his kind assistance with preparation of this article.)

Fast Facts

St-Tropez-La Môle

IATA: LTT	ICAO: LFTZ
Location:	43° 12' 19" N, 6° 28' 55" E 18km (11mi) southwest of St-Tropez
Elevation:	59ft (18m)
Area:	32ha (79ac)
Runway:	06/24, 1,278 x 30m (4,192 x 98ft) usable length (takeoff): 1,180m (3,871ft) (landing): 1,040m (3,412ft)
Radio:	118.125mHz
Website:	www.st-tropez-airport.com