

FBO Profile: Bohlke International Airways, Henry E. Rohlsen Airport, St. Croix

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The facility offers 50,000-sq-ft of hangar space, which can shelter G450-size aircraft from the searing sun. With more than 30,000 feet of ramp space, abundant parking is available. (Photo: Curt Epstein)



While St. Thomas might have a more glamorous reputation among the U.S. Virgin Islands than nearby St. Croix, the latter is slowly establishing itself as an idyllic getaway destination in its own right. The island, a favored vacation destination of Vice President Joe Biden, is the easternmost part of the United States and its territories, and is actually situated closer to Africa than Los Angeles. That proximity made it an important cog in the U.S. response to last year's African Ebola crisis, with several large military aircraft landing every day for weeks, to refuel.

St. Croix's pristine beaches and turquoise waters are served by Henry E. Rohlsen International Airport, which—with its 10,000-foot runway—can handle anything with wings. The runway was lengthened from 7,500 feet more than a decade ago to allow max-weight takeoffs for Europe-bound aircraft.

Since 1959, the family-owned company now known as Bohlke International Airways (BIA) has had a presence at the airport and is now the oldest aviation company in the region. It was started as a charter service by the late Bill Bohlke Sr., who was granted an acre of land at the airport by the local government to build a hangar to foster the growth of private aviation on the island. The initial charter service, Virgin Island Airways, grew until it was eventually acquired by a commuter airline. The company immediately established a new charter company, Eastern Caribbean Airways, and began offering FBO services in 1969 when CEO Bill Bohlke Jr. (nowadays an FAA Wright Brothers Master Pilot award recipient with 37 years of airline service and a flight examiner since 1970) took over management of the company. Today his son serves as company president and chief pilot. BIA began selling jet fuel in 1975 and was the first FBO in the U.S. or its possessions to buy directly from the refinery and sell it as its own product, through a deal with Hess Oil.

The FBO, the lone service provider on the field, was sold in 1985 to Dynair, and Bohlke's charter operation and flight school relocated to a smaller nearby hangar, but four years later, after Category 5 Hurricane Hugo ravaged the island, the company reacquired the FBO (destroyed save for one open-air hangar) for pennies on the dollar and rebuilt it from the ground up.

FOCUS ON HOSPITALITY

The now 25-year-old 5,000-sq-ft two-story terminal offers a pilots' lounge, a snooze room with en suite spa-quality shower, flight-planning facility and crew car. The company, which is known for providing complimentary offerings from the local Cruzan rum distillery, has also negotiated preferred crew rates for local accommodations, including the island's Renaissance Carambola Beach Resort. In addition, the FBO offers a recently renovated lobby and passenger lounge decorated with locally produced artwork, a 12-seat ramp-view conference room, concierge service, onsite car rental and complimentary Wi-Fi. The facility is animal friendly for those passengers who wish to travel with their pets, even arranging their transport when the airlines are unable to. The FBO has a staff of 36 and is open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. with after-hours callout available. Customs, immigration and pre-clearance are provided at the commercial terminal between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. with 24-hour call-out available for international Part 135 flights.

For incoming passengers and crew alike, hospitality is number one, according to Ruth "Tuddy" Bohlke, company vice president and Bill's Jr.'s wife. "We try to portray the island as a friendly place you want to come visit not only coming through for business but to come back," she said told **AIN**. "It's the attitude of welcome to St. Croix, we're so happy you're here."

Unusual among Caribbean FBOs, the facility offers 50,000-sq-ft of hangar space, which can shelter G450-size aircraft from the searing sun. With more than 30,000 feet of ramp space, abundant parking is available, and it frequently hosts visiting U.S. military aircraft such as the massive C-5 Galaxy. That volume of parking space, the company notes, along with its lower fuel prices and less costly accommodations, makes St. Croix a good alternative for aircraft positioning compared with other more congested airports in the region. Its location just 400 miles north of Venezuela also puts Bohlke in the discussion as a quick-turn tech stop for aircraft transiting between the U.S. and South America.

A World Fuel dealer, BIA can also purchase fuel directly from Hovensa, the joint venture between Hess and Venezuela. It accepts all major fuel cards and its tank farm holds 50,000 gallons of jet-A; its fleet of six tankers holds another 50,000 gallons. A pair of avgas trucks (1,500 and 1,000 gallons respectively) serves the airport's piston traffic. The company's NATA Safety 1st-trained staff also provides all into-plane service for airliners at St. Croix as well.

In addition to maintaining the company's charter fleet, which includes a G100, Citation II, MU-2B-40 and King Air 200, Bohlke's mechanics also perform maintenance on transient aircraft. Aircraft detailing service is available too.

Last year, Bohlke signed an agreement with Island Global Yachting (IGY), the equivalent of a maritime FBO chain that caters to mega yachts. The deal makes Bohlke the preferred private aviation provider for IGY, so money spent with Bohlke counts as points in IGY's rewards program.