

Tirana, Albania: emerging from isolation

At first glance it would appear that Rinas Airport, Tirana takes security to the extreme. Scattered all over the airfield are some of the 300,000 bunkers that litter the Albanian countryside, remnants of Enver Hoxha's paranoia of invasion. Yet the Albania of 2001 is a very different country, keen to end years of international isolation and prepared to invest in developing its aviation security programme. **Philip Baum** reports.

"Albania – a shore unknown, which all admire, but many dread to view."

Lord Byron



Agron Nushaj, Head of Security at Rinas Airport

Albania is situated on the western part of the Balkan Peninsular, and borders Montenegro and Kosovo to the north, Macedonia to the north east, and Greece to the south and south east. To the west and south west are the Adriatic and Ionian Seas.

Now, as a Parliamentary Republic, the state and its three and a half million inhabitants are trying to distance themselves from years of isolation from the rest of the international community and to demonstrate that Lord Byron's warning is no longer applicable in the 21st Century.

As Albania develops its tourist industry, so too the airport is gearing up for change.

HISTORY

Albanian aviation history dates back to 1924 when Albania and Lufthansa signed an agreement for domestic air transport between Tirana and Skode, and Tirana and Vlore. International routes soon followed. By 1928 Adria Aero Lloyd was operating flights to Italy,

Greece and Bulgaria.

24 April 1951 saw the creation of the Albanian Airforce and on 5 January 1957 the Enterprise for Foreign Air Transport was established, the forerunner of the Civil Aviation Authority.

The airport was built in Rinas village in 1957 with the aid of the Soviet Union. Initially it was designed as a military aerodrome but, by 1970 a new terminal for passengers and a separate area for VIPs had also been built. In 1974, with a financial grant from China, runway lights were installed.

POST-HOXHA DEVELOPMENT

Since the collapse of Enver Hoxha's dictatorial regime in 1990, the Ministry of Transport of the newly elected government created, on 3 February 1991, the General Directorate of Civil Aviation.

The Directorate, in turn, established two independent enterprises: the National Agency for Aero Transport (ANTA) and Albtransport.

ANTA is responsible for the management of the airways of Albania, and for



Some of the 300,000 bunkers that litter the Albanian countryside are also to be located alongside the runways and taxiways at Tirana's Rinas Airport

the management and maintenance of navigation and lighting systems at Rinas airport. Whereas, Albtransport is responsible for ground operations (in respect of aircraft and passengers) and for airport maintenance.

There are considerable plans to modernise the airport. Spikermann GmbH has devised a master plan for the development of Rinas Airport that incorporates a new passenger terminal, construction of which is due to begin in about six months time.

The perimeter fence is 9500m in length. NATO constructed the emergency fence and one taxiway and, between 1995 and 1998, the German company, Siemens AG, repaired the runway, ramp lighting and the navigation equipment.

In 1990 about 30,000 passengers used Rinas, whereas the figures for 2000 are estimated as being around 420,000. Open daily from 0700 until 2000, operations peak between 1300 and 1600.

The number of foreign air carriers is gradually increasing and currently

includes: Alitalia, Hemus Air (Bulgaria), Adria Airways (Slovenia), Malev (Hungary), Olympic (Greece), Austrian, Swissair/Crossair and Turkish Airlines.

ALBANIAN CARRIERS

Albania has two carriers of its own. Albanian Airlines lease four TU-134, one TU-154 and one Yak-40 aircraft and operate to Rome, Bologna, Frankfurt, Istanbul, Prishtina and Zurich.

Ada Air own one Brazilian Embraer 110 aircraft and lease a Yak-40 and fly to the Italian cities of Bari and Rimini and

the Greek cities of Athens and Thessaloniki.

Albania is signatory to the Tokyo, Hague and Montreal ICAO conventions and has itself signed into effect Law 7877 addressing civil aviation and Law 8310 that specifically applies to aviation security.

SECURITY RESPONSIBILITY

Albania has its own National Aviation Security Programme and has further developed an Airport Aviation Security Programme. The latter bears a striking





Immigration checks upon arrival in Albania

resemblance to the former, perhaps not surprising when considering that Rinas is the only airport.

Security controls are the responsibility of three different agencies, jointly employing about 100 staff at Rinas:-

- Customs perform all passenger and baggage screening
- The police manage access control, including entry to the airport

- Albtransport handles security administration, including staff and vehicle ID pass issuance, security programme review, training, and ramp, terminal and perimeter patrols.

Customs utilise a single cabin baggage X-ray system and one hold baggage X-ray, through which crew baggage is also checked. Both machines are manufactured by Heimann. Tirana is already screening 100% of hold baggage.

In the event of an emergency, responsibility goes to the Ministry of Interiors Special Force and the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) is established in the Airport Director's office.

The Airport Security Committee meets regularly and comprises of the Airport Director, Airport Chief of Police, Commandant of the Military Force, Customs Chief, Fire Chief, a representative of each airline and Agron Nushaj.

Agron Nushaj is the man behind security at Rinas. Until recently he held two different positions in different organisations. He was Chief of Security for Albtransport as well as Director of Aeronautical Inspection within the Civil Aviation Authority.

In both positions he reported to Merita Xhafaj, Director General of the Civil Aviation Authority. Yet having found himself in the unusual position of being the line manager of the security

inspector responsible for inspecting security of the airport of which he is Chief of Security, change was inevitable. So, on 15th January 2001 Nushaj became Head of Security, Rinas Airport.

Albanian Airlines and Ada Air also have their own security staff who guard their own aircraft and accompany deportees when necessary. The number of such personnel is restricted. Both companies have developed their security programmes in accordance with the National Security Plan and the Civil Aviation Security Law.

SECURITY CONCERNS

Access control remains the primary problem for those responsible for security at Rinas, with the airfield being regarded as a shortcut for travel between the two villages on either side of the airport.

Fortunately there have been no terrorist incidents at the airport or on flights departing from it.

What does cause a problem is the high number of Albanian illegal immigrants who are impatient with the rate of change in the country.

Most foreign carriers carry out detailed travel document checks at the check-in in order to avoid being penalised by fines from other immigration authorities.

Some of those who do make it to



other countries find themselves being repatriated. Due to the strong Italian influence on Albania in respect of trade, industry and investment, many Albanians speak Italian and consequently head for Italy when afforded a window of opportunity.

Albanian Airlines, which operates to two Italian cities, does find itself having to provide security personnel to accompany deportees on flights back to Tirana.

One of the hallmarks of Albania is that it is a state in which three religions peacefully coexist: Islam, Roman Catholicism and Orthodox. Its commitment to religious freedom has resulted in practically no tension between the different faiths, so often the cause of terrorism and civil unrest in other states in the region. During World War II Albania refused to turn over its Jewish community to the Nazis and saved the entire community from extermination.

POTENTIAL

Rinas Airport is situated about a 30 minute drive from the capital Tirana. Truth be told, Tirana itself will have limited appeal to visitors, but the Albanian coastline is only a 40 minute drive from the airport in the opposite direction.

Once foreign investment begins to flow in, hotels will be developed and tour operators will put together holiday packages. For better or worse the Albanian coast and its beaches are waiting to be exploited and compete with the Greek, Italian and Croatian resorts of their neighbours.

It is with this long term plan in mind that Albania is taking the first steps forward, developing the infrastructure required to cope with the expected demand. The development of Rinas, both in respect of construction and adherence to international performance standards, security included, is part of this process.



Albanian Airlines crew member

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