

**Marco Finelli** took a flight with United Airlines from Honolulu to Guam to discover the complexities behind operating commercial passenger services across the vast and unpredictable Pacific Ocean.

*On final approach into Majuro's Amata Kabua International Airport, the first scheduled stop on the jet's 4,408 mile (7,094km) journey across the Pacific.*

ALL IMAGES THE AUTHOR.

Thrilling journeys to little-known corners of the globe may seem a distant memory as instant bookings and no-frills flights threaten to dominate air travel today. United Airlines, however, provides Pacific island-hopping services for die-hard adventurers in search of the golden age of aviation ... and a tiny taste of paradise. The carrier's Micronesia Flight 154 from Honolulu to Guam stops at five tropical islands during its 4,408 mile (7,094km) journey. Not only does the service pro-

vide a vital link to the outside world for local communities, but for the bolder traveller it is an adventure in paradise.

### ***In the Beginning***

Before 1968, there were no scheduled services linking the islands of the Pacific to the US mainland via Hawaii. This all changed when Air Micronesia was created by former US giant Continental Airlines and other local shareholders (see *Airliner World*, April 2009). However, while it marked a major advance in travel in the region, >>

# ***Island-hopping*** in *Paradise*



Parked at its Honolulu International Airport gate, United Airlines Boeing 737-824, N14249, makes preparations for a flight to Guam.



Early morning check-in for Flight UA 154 to Majuro.

Transportation Security Administration (TSA) checks being undertaken at Chuuk Airport. The facility has no X-ray scanning units and all searches are carried out by hand.

Passengers climb the boarding stairs to join the flight at Pohnpei. Note the cart containing umbrellas at the bottom of the steps: United Airlines is always prepared.

Passengers could disembark into the warm Pacific sunshine and take photographs at Majuro while the aircraft was turned around for the next leg of its journey.

serious technological hurdles remained. Not least was a lack of reliable navigation systems at the time, availability of jet fuel supplies, adverse weather and extremely long crew hours. Keeping aircraft operating so far from a mainland base and the need for basic airport infrastructure on the islands were also among challenges that had to be overcome before services were launched. But solutions were found and Air Mike (the carrier's callsign) launched its inaugural flight from Saipan to Honolulu on May 16 that year using Boeing 727-24C, N2475 (c/n 19528) Ju-Ju. The US major eventually became the sole owner of the carrier, changing its name to Continental Air Micronesia. Today, the twice-weekly service is flown by United Airlines following its merger with Continental on October 1, 2010.

### Nothing is Straightforward

Despite modern navigation and flight management systems, flying over the Pacific is still fraught with danger, particularly from dramatic

weather systems that can wreak havoc in the region. Runways on the islands of Kwajalein and Majuro have been extended to comfortably allow jet operations, but other airports across the Federation States of Micronesia have little more than air strips of around 6,000ft (1,830m) long although they are kept in good condition, thanks to upgrades paid for by the US Federal Aviation Administration.

Most facilities are built close to the sea so high tides and flooding are a constant problem. Majuro is affected particularly badly, despite its concrete sea walls as waves regularly break over them affecting operations. Meanwhile, on Kosrae – another destination on the author's journey – seawater recently contaminated the airport's fuel storage tanks so flights were unable to land on the island until the problem was rectified.

United Airlines operates its Honolulu to Guam flights with two full cockpit crews on board. The initial leg, from Hawaii to Majuro, the longest



at 2,285 miles (3,677km), is flown by the first. After landing in Majuro they handover to the second crew who fly the remaining 2,123 miles (3,417km) to Guam. Because of the specific demands placed on pilots flying the island-hopping services, they undergo additional training from United. Also on board is an engineer, who travels with 2,000lb (907kg) of spare parts to ensure the aircraft remains serviceable so far from mainland maintenance facilities.

### Today's Workhorse

For my island-hopping adventure, United Airlines assigned Boeing 737-824, N14249 (c/n 28809), which had been built originally for Continental and was delivered to the carrier on January 10, 2000. The jet is configured in a two-class layout, consisting of 14 Business Class seats in a 2+2 layout, and 127 seats in Economy. Two rows in the front cabin are reserved for the additional crew on board.

Arriving at Honolulu International Airport early in the morning I found the terminal already busy with people checking in for their flights. Immediately noticeable are the large number of oversized bags, including cooler boxes which, I was reliably informed, are packed with ice, frozen meat and other items that are rarely available on the islands. After the normal formalities are completed, it is on into the departure lounge where the aircraft is already parked at its gate.

Despite the early hour, the scheduled departure time has already passed before passengers are called for boarding. Once on board, cabin crew help passengers to store their bags and complete the formalities ready for departure. With everybody settled a quick look around shows that the Business Class section at the front is full and there are no empty seats in the Economy cabin

either. The onboard in-flight entertainment (IFE) system is antiquated compared with today's modern standards, with only Business passengers having personal monitors. United is in the process of upgrading the cabins of its 737 fleet, to include new lightweight seats and free Wi-Fi connection.

### Departure to Majuro

Over 30 minutes behind schedule the doors are finally shut and we are pushed back. After engine startup the aircraft taxis towards the departure Runway 08 Right, lining-up on the centre-line ready for take-off. After clearance from air traffic control the jet accelerates down the runway. Shortly after take-off it makes an immediate turn to the right to avoid over-flying the hotels lining Waikiki beach. Continuing to climb smoothly in the early morning air we soon reach our cruising altitude of FL350 and set a course for Majuro,

Continuing southwest we pass the International Date Line, so having left Hawaii early on Saturday morning we will land in Majuro on Sunday.



United Airlines provides umbrellas for its passengers disembarking from the aircraft at a wet Pohnpei.

2,285 miles (3,677km) to the southwest. This is the longest leg of the day, with a scheduled flying time of 4hrs 35mins.

As the passengers settle into the flight the cabin crew serves breakfast of eggs, sausage and mixed salad. An hour and a half into the journey we cruise over Johnston Atoll, the former US military base, which was closed in 2004. The main island is being 'cleaned-up' after years of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons testing rendered this small outcrop in the Pacific Ocean virtually uninhabitable.

Continuing southwest we pass the International Date Line, so having left Hawaii early on Saturday morning we will land in Majuro on Sunday. The 737's on-board navigation systems are very accurate and the crew knows the jet's exact position over the Pacific, however airport systems aren't quite so modern in these parts. Majuro, for instance, is equipped with just a non-directional beacon and precision approach path indicator (PAPI) on both of its runways. We are cleared to land at Amata International Airport, its 7,897ft (2,407m) runway aligned 07/25 and virtually surrounded by the sea.

The jet overflies Arno Atoll and continuing its high rate of descent makes a right-hand turn at 1,600ft to line-up with the runway's centreline. Flaps are set to 40° and the aircraft appreciably slows. Soon after its wheels kiss the runway. >>

The aircraft circled around after taking off from Pohnpei Airport giving passengers excellent views of the Pacific atoll.

Spectacular sunsets can be enjoyed on the Pacific island of Kosrae.



Island-hopping Itinerary		
Honolulu to Majuro	08:05 (Sat) -10:47 (Sun)	4h42m
Majuro to Kwajalein	11:53-12:39	0h46m
Kwajalein to Kosrae	13:42-13:39	0h57m
Kosrae to Pohnpei	14:16-15:07	0h51m
Pohnpei to Chuuk	16:03-16:02	0h59m
Chuuk to Guam	17:00-18:20	1h20m
All are local times		



### Onwards Across the Pacific

With the aircraft ready and refuelled, passengers are invited back on board. The flight is almost full for this short hop of 295 miles (474km) to Kwajalein and once the door is closed all observe the safety briefing. After a short taxi to runway 07, the jet lines-up ready for departure. After ATC clearance it quickly accelerates down the runway and is soon airborne continuing in an easterly direction before banking to the left over the Majuro lagoon and heading northwest. During the 40 min flight we climb to a cruising altitude of 30,000ft, while the cabin crew provides a drinks service.

As the jet approaches Kwajalein, the atoll is covered by an extensive carpet of cloud. Breaking through the overcast, the Pacific's turquoise waters stretch out below as the jet flies a base leg parallel to runway 06/24. A final right-hand turn establishes the jet on its final approach and the breezy conditions lead to hard landing on the atoll's 6,668ft (2,032m) runway. The aircraft vacates the runway and taxis to the large parking ramp in front of the airport's terminal. The only people allowed to disembark are locals and military personnel stationed here.

Once more passengers are asked to bring their bags for inspection, while the jet is thoroughly checked again. A few new passengers embark and soon we are ready to depart again. The aircraft is around 65% full for this leg and after backtracking down, lines-up on 06 ready for take-off. As the 737 climbs away from Kwajalein it banks to the right giving passengers seated on this side spectacular views of the atoll. Ahead is a 405 mile (652km) flight which will take around an hour to complete. The weather en route and at the destination is forecast to be showery and quite windy, so it will not be a smooth journey. All too soon the warm Pacific sun is replaced by dark clouds.

*The final approach to Majuro was bumpy but once on the ground the thrust reversers were deployed and the aircraft slowed to taxiing speed.*

*Inside the small terminal on Kosrae. Here passengers can purchase souvenir T-shirts as well as bags of locally grown tangerines.*



With a light crosswind the final approach is a little bumpy but once on the ground the engine thrust reversers are deployed and rapid de-acceleration is achieved. After a short taxi, the aircraft parks on the airport's small apron. Passengers for Majuro are directed to immigration and baggage collection, while transit passengers are allowed to leave the jet to take pictures or wait in the transit lounge. On the ground the weather is warm and sunny, but a little breezy. Meanwhile, the 737 is prepared for the next leg of its

journey. Mandatory checks enforced by Transportation Security Administration (TSA) requires a full inspection of the cabin, all overhead bins must be emptied and any bags left on board either in the bins or under the seats are confiscated. The process is complicated if the weather is bad and passengers choose to stay on board. United tries to ensure the turn-around is complete within 45mins. For the next five legs of the journey a flight engineer joins the crew to ensure the aircraft remains airworthy during the various stops through to Guam.



*Preparing for another island-hopping service is this de Havilland Canada DHC-8-100, V7-0210 (c/n 218) belonging to Air Marshall Islands.*

Kosrae is the southernmost destination of our journey and lies just 5° north of the equator. The 05/23 aligned runway at 5,750ft (1,753m) is the shortest of seven visited during the trip today and is located on the northern edge of the island. We have a firm landing on runway 05, after which the 737 backtracks almost to the 05 threshold before turning off and taxiing to the small apron in front of the modest terminal. Due to the possibility of rain, transit passengers are asked to remain on board during the turnaround. Again, the jet's fuel tanks are topped up for the next leg, while disembarking and embarking passengers are provided with umbrellas as the predicted rain arrives. United's local ground staff carry out the required TSA inspection, creating disruption on board as they inspected baggage within the confined cabin space. It is the third such check for some passengers in a relatively short period.

With all checks completed and new passengers settled on board it's time to depart again, the next sector taking us to Pohnpei, 341 miles (549km) to the northwest. Inclement weather is forecast for the whole of the flight, so the fasten seatbelt signs stay illuminated

throughout. The jet descends through the clouds and lands on the 6,001ft (1,829m) 09/27 runway during an intense rain shower. The turnaround procedures are repeated again, with enough fuel to reach Guam uploaded as there is no jet fuel available at the next destination, Chuuk.

The weather is still overcast and raining as we lift-off and the aircraft bounces around in the turbulent air as it climbs on course for its next port of call. After a flight time of less than an hour we land in Chuuk. This is just a brief stop, with a few passengers disembarking, while others take their place on board. One more TSA inspection has to be endured and once completed we depart.

The last hop is just over 600 miles (1,000km) and will take 85mins to complete. Shortly after take-off the aircraft

makes a left-hand turn and sets a course for Guam. Very soon the sun sets and the final part of the journey is made in darkness and as we approach Guam, the island's 10,015ft (3,052m) 06R runway is clearly visible. After landing we taxi to the terminal and the engines are shut down. We arrive 15mins behind schedule, which is quite good considering we left Honolulu more than 30mins late.

My journey was long, but thoroughly enjoyable and I enjoyed talking to fellow travellers who shared fond recollections of the original Air Mike island-hopping services. Notwithstanding local criticism of the current service, it was an amazing experience for a seasoned globetrotter. However, it would make sense to break down the journey and stop for a day or two at each island to experience the local cultures and stunning views. You'll not be disappointed for choosing an island-hopping adventure. **AWA**

**Breaking through the cloud the Pacific's turquoise waters stretch out below as the jet flies a base leg parallel to Runway 06/24.**

The author would like to thank United Airlines as well as Walter Dias (China and Korean GM) Koji Nagata (PR Manager for Far East Asia and Pacific) for their help in preparing this article.

*After taking off from Kwajalein, passengers on the starboard side of the aircraft have spectacular views of the small Pacific atoll.*

