

# Attzs: CAL must rethink US\$-only online sales

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Majority state-owned Caribbean Airlines (CAL) has defended its foreign currency-based payment model, saying nearly 70 per cent of its expenses—such as aircraft leases, fuel, taxes and maintenance—are billed in foreign currency.

The airline insists this “economic reality” requires a balanced approach to maintain its financial sustainability.

But in an immediate response, economist Dr Marlene Attzs said the airline’s explanation does not resolve the key issue: the inability of nationals to make online payments for international travel in T&T dollars using local debit cards. She also questioned the long-term viability of CAL’s forex-heavy model.

“Yes, CAL says 70 per cent of its expenses are in USD, but is that model sustainable in today’s economic climate? And should nationals be forced to meet that forex demand when they themselves have limited access to US dollars?” she asked.

Attzs argued that introducing an option to allow online purchases in TT dollars—at least for customers with locally issued cards—could represent a balanced and workable compromise.

“It would enhance accessibility for the travelling public and position CAL as a preferred option for individuals who do not have access to US dollars for online payments—including students, small business owners, retirees, and low- to middle-income earners,” she said.

The debate was sparked by a Sunday newspaper column in which Attzs called on CAL to ease the pressure on foreign exchange reserves by enabling TT-dollar online payments. She suggested the airline could still access foreign exchange for overseas expenses through formal, regulated channels, without placing the burden on citizens.

CAL, in a statement, said it already accepts TT-dollar payments at ticket offices in Piarco, Port-of-Spain, San Fernando, and Tobago, and via local travel agents. It also pointed to TT-dollar payment options through its mobile app for domestic travel, and to its Caribbean Layaway plan, which allows interest-free instalment payments in local currency.

Attzs welcomed those options, but said they do not address the real issue.

“Visiting a physical location isn’t always feasible—especially for the elderly or time-strapped individuals, or those living outside urban centres,” she said.

Attzs pointed to a foreign-owned retailer operating locally that began accepting TT-dollar debit cards for online purchases as an example of flexibility in response to local market realities.

“If a private entity can do it, surely a state-owned airline with a public mandate can at least consider the same,” she said.

Framing the issue as a chance for innovation, Attzs said this was not an attack on the airline but a call for practical, people-centred solutions.

“I’m encouraged by the national conversation that has emerged around this issue. It reflects a public that is engaged and concerned about how we manage our economy—including our limited, shared economic resources.

This is a valuable opportunity for collective problem-solving and forward-thinking engagement.

“As we continue to navigate our economic realities, we must remain guided by the principles of accessibility, fairness, and above all, fiscal responsibility. If the COVID-19 pandemic taught us anything, it is that challenging times call for innovation, flexibility, and bold thinking. Let’s keep that spirit alive as we work together to find smarter, more inclusive solutions to the thorny issue of foreign exchange in our economy.”

CAL is a joint venture that is 88.06 per cent owned by the Government of T&T and 11.94 per cent by the government of Jamaica.