

Shannon and the American love affair

A look at the airports transatlantic ties that have attracted presidents, politicians and celebrities

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FOR THE past 70 years, Shannon Airport taken part in a long distance love affair with America. This week, continuing to show that cross Atlantic affection, Shannon rolled out the red carpet for the 45th President of the United States of America, Donald Trump.

This continued a strong tradition which has seen every US President since John F Kennedy welcomed to the Clare Airport.

But how exactly did Shannon grow to have this special relationship with the Americas, that has seen not only presidents, but celebrities of all sorts stop in the shadow of Ireland's largest river.

Culturally, Shannon, and Ireland in general, sits closer to Boston than Berlin. With English as the common tongue, and so many Americans identifying as having strong ancestral connections, Ireland is an obvious choice for Americans when choosing a country to visit in Europe.



Chef at Shannon Airport preparing Irish Coffees in 1955 for dignitaries

Geographically, the fact it is the largest Airport on the west coast, as well as being Europe's most westerly airport, it has grown from three simple grass runways in 1930s to

become one of Europe's most unique transatlantic airports.

The story started in 1935, when the Irish government began hunting for a suitable base for the operation



President of Cuba, Fidel Castro visited Shannon during a stop-over in 1982.



President John F Kennedy stopped in Shannon during his Irish visit in 1963. He is pictured with Mayor of Limerick Frances Condell when he visited the city

of seaplanes and landplanes on a transatlantic service. Rineanna in Co Clare was the Government's choice and so Shannon Airport.

The hub continued to grow and in 1947, Shannon Airport became the first customs free airport in the world. This established Shannon as an international industrial and distribution centre.

The airport is also home to the world's first duty-free shop, which began as a simple kiosk measuring just a few square metres, selling souvenirs and gifts. The Duty Free shop became an immediate success and has been copied in airports worldwide.

Shannon is also home to the world-famous Irish coffee, invented by airport Chef Joe Sheridan in 1942 at the original airport location in Foynes, a sea-plane base for transatlantic flights.

It was invented to keep passengers warm.

The airport grew and in the 1940s and 1950s it was the primary transit stop for all airlines crossing the Atlantic to and from Europe.

Shannon's size is another reason that so many big names have visited the airport. With the longest runway in Ireland at 3,200 metres, it is the only Irish airport that can accommodate the world's largest jet, the Antonov AN 225. The enormous aircraft stands at seven stories high, with a wing span of 88 metres and has been on the Shannon runway a number of times.

It is also the only airport along the Wild Atlantic Way touring route to offer transatlantic flights, with six

airlines operating services to seven destinations.

So, from its humble beginnings, Shannon now stands a leader in airline innovation and a key driver of business in Ireland's midwest. And with its new found status as the gateway between the Americas and Europe firmly set, Shannon began to see a host of politicians and celebrities pass through its doors.

One of the biggest stars of the 1950s, Grace Kelly, visited Ireland three times and arrived into Shannon for her earliest visit before driving to the ancestral farm of her grandfather John Peter Kelly in Drimurra, Co Mayo.

In 1982, Fidel Castro landed in Shannon during a stopover. Castro, who transited Shannon several times, left a box of exclusive Cohiba cigars for then-taoiseach Charles Haughey.

Before resigning to his Tahitian island, Marlon Brando visited Ireland a number of times, landing at Shannon.

Other high profile visitors to Shannon Airport include: Nelson Mandela, Jackie Kennedy, Prince Charles and Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall.

Stars who have visited Shannon Airport include Marilyn Monroe, Gene Kelly, Bob Hope, Mohammed Ali, Mick Jagger, Tom Hanks and many more.

And although Donald Trump's visit might not be treated with the same plaudits that other world leader received, it does show a clear sign that Shannons special relationship with the United States is one that has lasted the ages.



Ted Kennedy, John's brother, visited Shannon Airport in 1970 with local journalists the late Noel Smith and Tom Browne in the background



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