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# Opinion: How a Tragic Airline Accident on St. Thomas Led to the Most Prosperous Decade in St. Croix's Recent History

## Tragic 1976 Air Crash Leads to St. Croix Aviation and Tourism Transformation

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**Boeing 727-2A7 crash in St. Thomas on January 1971 at the St. Thomas-Harry S.Truman Airport, now the Cyril E. King Airport. By. BILLY SIERRA**

On April 27, 1976, an American Airlines Boeing 727 jetliner, while landing at the Harry S. Truman Airport (Now the Cyril E. King Airport), on St. Thomas ran off the end of the runway and crashed into a Shell Gas Station, killing 37 (35 passengers and 2 flight attendants) of the 88 on board. Thirty-eight other passengers and crew were injured, and one person on the ground was

seriously injured. The runway was just 4,658 feet long at the time, yet still within the recommended length of 4500 feet.

But following this crash in 1976, and for the next 16 years, all large jets arriving to the U.S. Virgin Islands, including most British Virgin Islands passengers, were routed through St. Croix, who's runway was 7600 feet long at the time (and has since been extended to 10,004 feet). They then began operating Convair 440 propliners which ferried St. Thomas bound visitors from St. Croix over to St. Thomas, until such time that the St. Thomas airport runway was lengthened to 7000 feet. The hill located on the eastern end of the runway was mined and lowered, and the fill was used to extend the runway westward into the sea. The St. Thomas runway expansion was completed in 1992, successfully extending the runway from 4658 to 7000 feet.

This sudden and massive increase in air lift to St. Croix quickly generated new interest from vacationers and residents alike, who would not normally see or experience the big island just 40 miles to the south of St. Thomas. Upon final approach, St. Thomas, St. John and British Virgin Islands bound passenger would peer down to the right and witness for the first time one of the most beautiful and pristine beaches in the world, Sandy Point. Passengers looking out the left side windows would see the charming and historic town of Frederiksted, its cruise ship pier, historic fort, and more beautiful beaches running northward up the shore as far as the eye could see. It may have been the first time they saw and set foot, albeit briefly this time, on St. Croix, but for many of them it would not be the last! This newly discovered gem of an island would soon become their next vacation spot.

Not long after the crash in 1976, the visitor count began to rise. St. Croix gained direct flights to New York's JFK, Dulles and Philadelphia International Airports and Boston's Logan Airport in addition to the existing Miami flight. This created a major opportunity for US based visitors to easily access St. Croix via direct flights from major cities. Before this, nearly all St. Croix bound visitors would have to layover in Miami or San Juan. As a direct result of this new increased airlift, business began to boom, hotel rooms began to fill, restaurants were full and began requiring reservations, taxi drivers were busy... St. Croix was coming alive like never before or since.

Blessed with wide open spaces, large tracts of undeveloped land, and the most affordable real estate in the Caribbean, developers took notice. It wasn't long before they realized St. Croix was poised for growth and presented the perfect opportunity for new development. By 1980 plans were underway for several new condo projects, hotels, subdivisions for new home construction, hotels, nightclubs, restaurants, shopping centers and even more golf courses. As permits were slowly granted, construction began and by the early 1980's there were numerous projects underway. The St. Croix boom was on, and the following developments were on their way to becoming a reality:

- VILLA MADELEINE CONDOS - 43 freestanding villas with pool, plus Greathouse
- SOUTH GRAPETREE RESIDENTIAL SUBDIVISION
- CARDEN BEACH CONDOS - 30 luxury waterfront condos plus subdivision of waterfront homes and villas
- GALLOWS BAY REDEVELOPMENT - Bank, US Post Office, Hardware store etc.
- DIVI CARINA BAY EXPANSION INCLUDING NEW TIMESHARE UNITS
- POINT ELIZABETH - aka Grassy Point residential subdivision
- ESTATE WOOD COTTAGE - waterfront residential subdivision
- CONTESSA SID & NADIA FARBER'S CASTLE aka "THE CASTLE"
- CANDLE REEF CONDOS - 2 stages of luxury beachfront condos in Estate Green Cay
- CHENAY BAY BEACH COLONY - A beachfront resort

- PLANTATION AT SOUTHGATE CONDOS - 14 freestanding and a 4-unit building
- SOUTHGATE COURTYARD VILLAS - 24 1 bed units with attached commercial development
- CHEESEBURGERS IN PARADISE
- GREEN CAY MARINA & TAMARIND REEF HOTEL - 150 boat slips plus rehabilitated hotel
- KING'S ALLEY WALK - a harbor front shopping mall in Christiansted
- HOSPITAL STREET REDEVELOPMENT - a multi owner cooperative development running from Fort Christiansvaern to Gallows Bay
- SADDLEBACK RIDGE - residential subdivision Estate Boetzberg
- SCHOONER BAY CONDOS - 54 condos in Gallows Bay, pools and tennis courts
- SPYGLASS HILL RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY - Estate Eliza's Retreat, with multiple spec homes built
- CLUB ST. CROIX CONDOMINIUMS - 18 beachfront units, dock, tennis, pool, restaurant, with a 2nd phase planned
- CORMORANT COVE (NOW PELICAN COVE)CONDOS - 47 beachfront units, pool, tennis courts, with 2 more building planned
- HIBISCUS BEACH HOTEL
- DIAMOND KETURAH - a large hotel/condo and golf course development. (Hurricane Hugo ended it) Earthwork was underway, some condo pad sites in place
- SPRING GARDEN - residential subdivision
- GRANGE STOCK - residential subdivision
- DEERHAVEN ESTATES - residential subdivision in Estate Rattan
- VICORP LAND - residential subdivision
- VISTA CONCORDIA - residential subdivision
- ESTATE CONCORDIA WEST - waterfront residential subdivision
- ENSENADA CONDOMINIUMS - Whites Bay (Hugo ended it) machines were onsite, Farchette, Hanley & Johnson Real Estate had 50% of the units presold. It was to break ground when Hugo hit 2 days before.
- CARAMBOLA GOLF AND BEACH RESORT - plus 4 residential communities, Ginger Hills, Prosperity Ridge, Carambola Crest and Hibiscus Point along with 3 golf course villa projects; Sweet Lime I, Sweet Lime II and Saman Villas and improved golf course amenities and future subdivisions under design
- RITZ-CARLTON - site acquisition was underway and plans complete adjacent to the Carambola Hotel
- LONG REEF CONDOS - existing apartment building converted to 84 studios/1 beds/2 beds
- BAY GARDEN CONDOS - existing apartments converted to condos
- ORANGE GROVE CONDOMINIUMS - lack of sales post Hugo converted to rental apartments
- ORANGE GROVE COMMERCIAL CENTER - adjacent west of Pueblo Supermarket
- SUNSET BEACH CONDOS - 17 beachfront units north of Frederiksted
- ESTATE LA REINE - residential subdivision
- ESTATE LA REINE - commercial subdivision
- SUNSHINE MALL - Anchor Stores Kmart and Sunshine Supermarket
- ENFIELD GREEN RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY
- WHIM WATERFRONT RESIDENTIAL SUBDIVISION aka "Whim Shores"
- SALT RIVER RIDGE RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY - including spec homes, 2 of which were built before Hugo

- OXFORD ESTATES - large parcel "Gentlemen Estates" residential subdivision on the West End in the rain forest
- PROSPECT HILL ESTATES - residential community Frederiksted Northside A
- CLIPPER POINT - Estate Concordia Northside B
- EXPANSION OF THE LA GRANGE COMMUNITY-Through the stone pillars and up the ridge
- DOZENS OF NEW HOME SPECULATION CONSTRUCTION ALONG WITH MANY NEW PRIVATE RESIDENTIAL CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

Through the 1980's St. Croix enjoyed this prosperous time... locals and visitors alike were experiencing economic prosperity from this new influx of investment and tourism. The Sea Goddess mini cruise ship line began to call on Christiansted Harbor on a regular schedule. Property sales were booming, commercial rents were competitive, landlords were happy and new businesses were popping up everywhere. Existing leaseholds were valuable and traded at significant prices. We even had a state of the art carpeted and air-conditioned nightclub... anybody remember Hondo's and Hondo's Backyard? On any night, the towns were alive with restaurants, nightlife and tons of thriving shops and bars. Rumors Nightclub, Casa Loco, Grandstand, Wreck Bar, Sundowner (Frederiksted), Hamilton Mews, Parrots Perch... just to name a few. Up popped an expanded Little Switzerland, Java Wraps, United Colors of Benetton, Estee Lauder, Diamonds International, Violette's Boutique, White House/Black Market, Sunglass Hut, Ralph Lauren POLO Outlet, Gem Expose, Gold Shop, Manhattan Deli, Ritz Cafe, Colombian Emeralds, Chart House Restaurant, Burger King and Pizza Hut in downtown Christiansted. It was a glorious time for both towns. Frederiksted was hopping, and we opened our 3rd Farchette, Hanley & Johnson Real Estate office on King St. in Frederiksted to service the exploding West End real estate market.

The mood all changed on September 17, 1989. St. Croix got a direct hit from Category 5 Hurricane Hugo. It ravaged the island with a direct eyewall strike while only limping along westward at 3-5 mph. For 12 hours it pounded us and severely damaged or destroyed about 80% of the buildings. Power was not completely restored for over a year. St. Croix was in shambles. Luckily, reconstruction quickly began to take place, as back then insurance companies offered timely and generous payouts and property owners either sold their slab (we referred to hurricane damaged homes as "slabs") and moved off island or stayed and rebuilt to the new building code. Confident investors swooped in and bought up damaged properties and rebuilt them to the new and stronger construction standards. It appeared that STX was on its way to a magnificent comeback! But as bad luck would have it, the 1991 S&L Banking Crisis kicked in, the US mainland real estate market began to crash and the St. Thomas runway expansion was coming to completion. Little did we Crucians know, the direct flights which had spurred the St. Croix boom were gone for good. St. Croix returned to its pre 1976 flight options. The only way to get here was with a layover in Miami or San Juan.

The combination of the economic downturn on the mainland and the loss of St. Croix's direct connectivity to major US cities quickly began to take its toll on our island. Many of the developments underway or planned to begin in the coming months were canceled. Diamond Keturah and Ensenada presale deposits were refunded to anxious buyers worried about the economy and disappointed with the reduced airlift to the island. The Ritz-Carlton development was called off. The Hospital Street Redevelopment Project lost its steam, the Sea Goddess Cruise Line canceled all calls, additional phases of the new developments like Carden Beach, Cormorant Cove, Green Cay Marina Phase II were all canceled. The future was looking bleak, and by 1994

St. Croix was nearing the low point of an economic bust. The boom was over, and those who remained in business were in survival mode.

So where do we go from here? For starters we must work diligently to attract additional air lift to St. Croix by creating the incentives that will bring back these much needed routes; subsidize/waive landing fees, waive passenger taxes, waive overnight airline parking fees, guarantee seats, reduce airline counter and gate space rents... make St. Croix an attractive option for airlines so they will return. If we as a people truly want our island to prosper, it is up to us and our leaders to make it a priority and implement strategic incentives. What we may temporarily lose in Port Authority fees will be far exceeded by the increase on gross receipts and hotel taxes in the long run. If we do not, we will NEVER see the economic prosperity that we had back in the booming 1980's.

Submitted by Chris Hanley on Thursday, Nov. 9th, 2023

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