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# Fly the Whale Expanding to Puerto Rico Early 2024, Possibly Vieques Soon After

## Strategic Growth Plans Unfold as Airline Eyes New Regional Destinations

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A Fly the Whale pilot prepares to land at the Cyril E. King Airport on Monday, April 24, 2023 on one of the airline's inaugural flights between St. Croix and St. Thomas. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

“Just try us once, you’ll want to do it again,” promised Omer ErSalcuk, president of Fly the Whale, as he spoke to the Consortium about how the airline is faring half a year after it launched in the territory.

“Six months in, we’re right about where we want it to be,” Mr. ErSalcuk said. “We’re still going to focus, probably for the next few months, on St. Thomas-St. Croix, adding new places as we need them.” Fly the Whale’s base schedule of nine daily round trips between the two islands has been wildly popular, with some days requiring up to 12 flights to accommodate demand.

Virgin Islanders have flocked to the airline in such numbers that Mr. ErSalcuk says additional air support will be added. “We have another aircraft that is coming in...right after Thanksgiving,” he disclosed, explaining that the new aircraft will be used as relief to allow for “an engine inspection of both of the aircraft we have right now,” keeping in line with Fly the Whale’s safety priority. Mr. ErSalcuk explained that the “hot sections” of the engines would be removed and sent to the manufacturer, who would then “go through every blade and every part...to make sure that it’s solid and viable.” That process, he said, can keep an aircraft out of service for weeks, hence the need for a new plane to ensure the pace of flights does not dip.

“And then we’re looking at adding another aircraft” in addition to the Thanksgiving relief plane, Fly The Whale’s president said. The aim is to use the additional capacity to add flights to the already packed base schedule, and additionally, use it to accommodate special requests from members of the Whale Pack, the airline’s corporate program. “We want to make sure that the highway that we created between St. Thomas and St. Croix is open for business,” Mr. ErSalcuk declared.

The speed of commerce is an important component of the territory’s GDP, he argued, with Fly The Whale an integral part of maintaining that speed as high as possible. He framed the airline’s notoriously flexible rebooking policy as something that aligns with Fly The Whale’s people-second (safety-first!) philosophy. “Fly The Whale is not about getting you to a destination, it’s about getting you back home,” Mr. ErSalcuk said. “If you’re done early on St. Thomas or done early on St. Croix, there’s a flight so you can go home early, get back with your family.”

Outside of the internal territorial flights, Fly The Whale says it has plans to address unmet demand for down-island flights at some point in the future, though additional aircraft would be needed to handle those routes. The airline’s next endeavor will be to add flights to Puerto Rico through the Fernando Luis Ribas Dominicki Airport, also commonly known as Isla Grande Airport.

“We don’t have a timeframe right now,” Mr. ErSalcuk admitted, saying the new route would perhaps be launched early in 2024. Isla Grande, he explained, “is right where the cruise ships depart in Old San Juan.” The intention is not to compete with Silver and Cape Air, who Mr. ErSalcuk says are doing an excellent job of serving the international market. “We’re more interested in the local traveler that needs to go to Puerto Rico, and vice versa.” Initial flights would be out of St. Croix, Mr. ErSalcuk said. Apart from Isla Grande, “we’ve had a lot of requests for Vieques,” leading the company to consider adding that as a stop as well.

Ultimately, Fly The Whale wants to be the airline of the Virgin Islands. “Every time somebody travels on Fly The Whale, they’re making an investment towards a company that is based here for here, and has the number one interest of the VI [at heart], and that’s important,” Mr. ErSalcuk said. He described the development of Atlanta, Georgia from a “backwater” in the 1960s to a “world class city” today, “because Delta over 70 years has built that operation up to over 1000 flights per day.” He is interested in developing a similar bustling hub in the Virgin Islands, providing connectivity within the territory as well as to its Caribbean neighbors.

“The connection thing is important because we would also like to create connections where, let’s say, we send a flight down to St. Lucia out of St. Croix.” Even without Fly The Whale creating

trans-Caribbean connections itself, Mr. ErSalcuk says that just adding more internal flights will be helpful. “The more flights we have out of St. Croix and St. Thomas, the more flights the major carriers will add because they see there’s feed,” he insisted. “The more flights the majors add into the islands, the more tourism is going to happen, the more economics is going to happen.”

And [Fly The Whale](#), Mr. ErSalcuk hopes, will be right in the thick of this swirl of new activity, providing its signature easy connections and responsive customer service to Virgin Islanders as they travel their territory, and visitors as they explore everything the USVI has to offer.

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