

The Virgin Islands Consortium

St. Croix Businessman Sees Potential In Stagnant Economy, Launches Hummingbird Air

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The current economic climate on St. Croix is not one that is considered inviting by many, as the high cost of energy continues to eat into the pockets of everyone, not to mention the shuttering of the HOVENSA refinery that forced many-a-skilled persons to leave the island to seek employment and a better standard of living elsewhere.

But Sam Raphael, founder of [Hummingbird Air](#) and longtime St. Croix resident, sees things differently. He loves swimming upstream, he says, when it comes to business. The times when everyone is running away because they say things are too difficult, Raphael relishes the challenge, as he says he enjoys attaining victory where others have failed.







Hummingbird Air









Hummingbird Air

So why aviation? By Raphael's own admission, it is one of the most difficult enterprises to get into because of the start-up expense.

"There's a joke that people pass around, they say to become a millionaire in the aviation business is to start with a billion dollars," Raphael said, highlighting the significant costs involved in launching an airline company. "It's very, very difficult -- and especially here in the Caribbean where you have these different restrictions. Every island is its own kingdom with its own rules and permits, which makes it more challenging, and operation over water is very expensive because of the salt and other factors, [plus] a whole lot of immigration issues," he explained.



Hummingbird Air at its home base on St.

Croix

Yet, Raphael is no stranger to uphill battles. He likened the situation to a real estate market where homes are being foreclosed upon and people start moving away. Raphael said that is the best time to move in and "purchase cheap" because once the economy picks back up, the ones who purchased real estate when it seems as if the market would never recover, are the ones who will reap the most fruit.

It's the exact situation Raphael faced when he started what is now rated as No. 2 on Trip Advisor's Top 25 Caribbean Destinations, [Jungle Bay Resort](#), because the location he chose to construct the hotel was what many would call "behind God's back." Today, however, it is a premier destination and employs over 60 people in Dominica. Jungle Bay has been given rave reviews by top publications around the world, including *New York Times*, *US News & World Report*, *Travel + Leisure Magazine*, *Forbes Traveler* and more.

Raphael is hoping to have the same level of success on St. Croix with Hummingbird.

"Sam is back," he said *VI Consortium* should remind residents. He is not only ready to run a company on St. Croix, but invest generously in the community through various programs. Raphael has invested in the youth of Dominica through an entrepreneurship program that has birthed many successful businesses, and he wants to start something in Virgin Islands.



Hummingbird Air

"Our principle base of operations is St. Croix, and that's been the question that people have been asking--'why St. Croix because you tend to have more traffic in St. Thomas?'

For me, [it's because] I'm connected to St. Croix. This is home," Raphael said. "So, while people are talking about the HOVENSA refinery closing, and people are leaving, I think it presents an opportunity to come home and make a difference. And certainly we have a

great 10,000 foot runway and so forth, but there is the other consideration that is more personal."

And he said there are things coming down the pike.

"We've got some future plans for Hummingbird Air and for St. Croix," Raphael disclosed. "I certainly intend to make a contribution economically and to the social development moving forward."

Hummingbird Air employs about a dozen people, and counting, on St. Croix. The company is also hiring pilots and there are some employees on St. Thomas. Hummingbird operates three airplanes that transport passengers back and forth from Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Kitts and more recently, the Dominican Republic.

"[Our planes] are designed to seat 15 passengers, but we've reduced the sitting configuration to nine passengers, which enables us to carry more cargo load and so on. So, it's sort of a mix cargo/passenger operation, but it's very comfortable," Raphael said.

Raphael's resume boasts a host of community development efforts, and he is called upon by major universities to give lectures and by governments to give council. Raphael says he is committed to the success of Hummingbird because he is committed to doing his part in bringing opportunities to St. Croix.

Undoubtedly, that's something St. Croix's residents can appreciate.

To learn more about Hummingbird Air, visit the company's website [here](#).