

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Flights To USVI Have Increased Following Storms, But Lack Of Rooms Poses Problem

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Five months after two Category 5 hurricanes walloped the U.S. Virgin Islands, flights to the territory have been increasing, a sign that normalcy continues to take hold.

"Beginning May 24, 2018, Spirit Airlines will launch new nonstop service between Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport and St. Croix's Henry E. Rohlsen Airport. The service will run three times per week on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays," said Department of Tourism Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty, while testifying last week during a Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture hearing. "In the coming months, Spirit Airlines, Delta Air Lines and JetBlue Airways will be expanding their service to St. Thomas, and in April United Airlines will resume service to St. Thomas from

Washington, DC; Newark, New Jersey; and Houston, Texas."

That being said, St. Thomas -- [with multiple of its major hotels shuttered for repairs](#) -- is down nearly 50 percent in flight capacity year-over-year, while St. Croix is down 15 percent.

Mrs. Nicholson-Doty said that air travel capacity to St. Croix would be slightly above 5,000 seats per week in mid-May. The island averaged over 6,000 seats per week the same period last year. The commissioner further stated that air travel capacity to St. Thomas would top 10,000 seats by mid-summer.

For St. Thomas, and to a lesser extend St. Croix, the lack of rooms to accommodate visitors affects all areas of the tourism industry -- from the hotel occupancy tax, to day-to-day activities that benefit taxis and vendors. And the problem can't simply be relegated to storm damage, as Federal Emergency Management Agency personnel, along with other contractors in the territory working on recovery, have occupied rooms that would otherwise be available to tourists.

On the cruise ship front, the territory's fortunes are a lot worse: According to Mrs. Nicholson-Doty, the combination of two destructive hurricanes and a previously projected decline in cruise ships to the territory, means a drop of up to 30 percent in cruise ship visits to the USVI. "The return of the cruise industry within 60 days of the first September storm has been positively received. However, the reality we are facing is that cruise ship traffic has not fully stabilized. Combined with the pre-storm reduction in calls it is anticipated that we will see a 20 to 30 percent year-on-year decrease in cruise arrivals in 2018," she said.

To keep the drop from deepening, Mrs. Nicholson-Doty said the department will attempt to solidify its relationships with the various cruise lines at Seatrade Global, the world's largest gathering of who's who in the cruise industry, bringing together cruise line executives, media, speakers, port representatives, ship builders and vendors to discuss most aspects of cruising. "While in South Florida we will also host receptions for Virgin Islands tourism ambassadors, travel agents and meeting planners, cruise industry executives, and meet with media personnel," Mrs. Nicholson-Doty said.

The department's latest campaign, "Still Nice", a play on the long-running "Virgin Islands Nice" campaign, powered by recording artist Pressure's [popular song](#), is being heavily promoted on social media, according to D.O.T.. The commissioner said social media has become the department's main tool to highlight the territory following the hurricanes, and D.O.T. intends to continue utilizing such platforms moving forward.

"Engagement and activity on social media is up more than 50 percent over the past several months with many brand enthusiasts expressing their desire to come back to the USVI," she said. "Over the next few months the department will continue to promote "Still Nice" via social media and will be launching a series of social videos, capturing various aspects of our product, including our natural beauty."

Feature Image: Frenchman's Reef & Morning Star Marriott Marriot Beach Resort after Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The resort has been shuttered for repairs and [won't reopen](#)

until 2019. (Credit: *Ernice Gilbert, VIC*)

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