

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Liat Officially Announces Return To USVI, Says Flights To St. Croix 'Not Financially Sustainable'

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ST. THOMAS -- At a press conference at Government House here on Monday morning, Liat officials, along with representatives from the Department of Tourism, the Virgin Islands Port Authority and Lieutenant Governor Osbert Potter, announced the return of Liat to the U.S. Virgin Islands, beginning on July 2.

In announcing the venerable Caribbean airline's return, Mr. Potter spoke of Liat's over 4 decades of service to the territory, and the inconvenience that Virgin Islanders were faced with when the airline pulled out of the USVI in March and June of 2017, from St. Croix and St. Thomas respectively. (The announcement was made [in February 2017](#).)

"I understand how cumbersome it must be and has been for all the individuals that have been traveling," Mr. Potter said, later conveying his excitement with the airline's return, (he even encouraged travelers to book tickets with Liat).

As for Liat, the feeling of excitement was mutual. "Liat, the Caribbean airline, is happy to announce the commencement of service to the United States Virgin islands from summer 2018," said Shavar Maloney, corporate communications manager at Liat. "This provides even more travel opportunities for Virgin Islanders to visit the Caribbean whether for business or for pleasure."

But [as reported last week by The Consortium](#), Liat has abandoned its St. Croix route and will only be traveling to St. Thomas directly from Antigua.

Liat will travel three times weekly to the territory's capital from Antigua: On Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays, leaving the V.C. Bird International Airport in Antigua at 11:20 a.m. and arriving at the Cyril E. King International Airport at 12:20 p.m. The same flight will leave CEKA at 1:20 p.m., and arrive in Antigua at 2:20 p.m. The aircraft being used for the Antigua/St. Thomas route will seat 48 passengers, and is said to be one of Liat's newer planes offering a high level of comfort.

"This will allow passengers to easily connect to any of the destinations within the Liat network," Mr. Maloney said.

No flights to St. Croix

Mr. Maloney said when Liat pulled out of the territory last year, it vowed to return once "operational integrity" had been restored. That restoration, Mr. Maloney said, was achieved in part by cutting Liat's St. Croix route, a market Mr. Maloney said plainly was not profitable for the company. "One of the markets we were losing money in was St. Croix, and so we had to make that financial decision leaving St. Croix," he said. "So you may ask why we're not going back to St. Croix, the reason is that it's not financially sustainable for us at this point."

Ask what would need to happen for Liat to return to St. Croix, David Isaac, Liat's regional manager, said he would leave a response to the question up to the airline's commercial department, officials of whom he said are consistently assessing markets. But the airline's return to St. Croix, if ever, won't be anytime soon, suggested Mr. Isaac. "Right now I don't know that that market will be sustainable based on the information I'm getting from that team," he said, referring to Liat's commercial department. "

As part of its return, Liat's landing fees were also waived for one year, as previously reported by The Consortium. A Virgin Islands Port Authority official explained that the incentive wasn't exclusive to Liat, and Mr. Potter later said that InterCaribbean Airlines, [which commences connecting flights in St. Thomas and St. Croix](#) later this month, would also be granted the same benefit.

USVI Dept. of Tourism pledges support

Dept. of Tourism Assistant Commissioner, Joyce Dore-Griffin, said D.O.T. would assist Liat in making its return to the territory successful by including Liat in D.O.T.'s marketing plan. The strategy entails posting information about Liat on D.O.T.'s various social media

platforms; news releases, feature stories, banner advertising, deals, press luncheons and local media events. The plan also includes travel industry reception for local travel agents, the development and promotion of vacation packages, the offering of sponsorship opportunities for local events and festivals, regional media familiarization visits, reverse travel familiarization, and USVI features in in-flight magazines, Mrs. Dore-Griffin said. Campaigns to help bridge the gap between the U.S. Virgin Islands and the wider Caribbean, along with destination tourism, meetings and conventions, business travel and association media, are also planned, according to Mrs. Dore-Griffin.

Leave Island Anytime [LIAT]? Not anymore, the company says

Liat officials, well aware of the airline's poor reputation in punctuality, said the company in the last year had improved its on-time percentage by 19 percent, going from 49 percent -- well below industry standards in 2016 -- to 68 percent in 2017, according to Mr. Maloney. The airline is aiming for an 80 percent average in 2018, a goal that has so far been met Mr. Maloney said.

"We accept what our customers are saying, and we really had to step back, listen to the market and see how we are going to improve," Mr. Maloney said, "because we're really a connection throughout the Caribbean."

Liat, founded on October 20, 1956, is owned by several Caribbean governments, among them Antigua, Barbados, Dominica and St. Vincent. The airline is headquartered in Antigua.