

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Spirit Airlines Gets Royal Welcome To St. Croix; Carrier Offering Three Weekly Flights With 20 Different Destinations

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ST. CROIX -- Carla Jones's mom died one year ago on May 25. On the eve of this tragic anniversary, Ms. Jones flew home to St. Croix to support her father. She did so at a low fare via Spirit Airlines – for the first time ever.

That's because Spirit aircrafts have never flown to St. Croix. Until now, that is.

Ms. Jones was one of 131 passengers who boarded in Fort Lauderdale Thursday to fly on Spirit's inaugural flight to the island. Other passengers included Tourism

Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty and Senator Kurt Violet.

As Spirit's A319 aircraft made its way onto the tarmac, it became undeniable that something grand was happening.

Two fire trucks, one on each side of the plane, fired steady streams of water over the aircraft, creating a water arch formally known as the water salute. Passengers and crew members were later greeted with a fanfare of steel band playing, dancing moko jumbies, and quelbe dancing from the moment they disembarked the flight to the moment they collected their baggage.

The Process: Why St. Croix? Why now?

St. Croix is now Spirit's 13th Caribbean destination and the airlines' 65th destination overall. However, this moment is the result of half a decade's worth of negotiations between the Tourism Department, the Virgin Islands Port Authority, and the airline.

During a press conference right after the landing, Governor Kenneth Mapp called Mrs. Nicholson-Doty a "Virgin Islands treasure" and publicly thanked her for her involvement in the project.

"The hard work you continue to do for the people of the Virgin Islands is not going unnoticed," the governor said, "and the result of your work speaks for itself."



Neelia Ross, VI Department of Tourism deputy commissioner; Governor Kenneth Mapp, Laurie Villa, senior vice president of Spirit Airlines; and David Mapp, VI Port Authority executive director celebrate their new partnership with a ribbon cutting ceremony (Wyndi Ambrose, VIC)

While the neighboring island of St. Thomas has been a destination for Spirit for more than 12 years, Mrs. Nicholson-Doty said her department had been working with the airline for about 5 years to make St. Croix a destination too. In January, a Spirit team came to the island for a site visit and four months later, their aircraft landed at the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport.

The question remains: Why is St. Croix only an opportune destination now?

According to Mark Kopczak, Spirit's Vice President of Network Planning, airline administrators have to think carefully about the places where they can be the most effective, and over the years, they've been following a priority list based on that standard.

"It's not just about flying to St. Croix," he said. "It's all of the different places that we can potentially fly to and we kind of have a priority order, if you will, of the places where we think we can make the most impact."

Airline administrators have a formula for deciding where they can make the most impact. According to Mr. Kopczak, they look for three things: (1) places that lack service (2) places that have very high fares (3) places that will generate enough customers to fill an airplane.

Recent research showed the Spirit team that St. Croix was a top candidate for a new destination.

"When we looked at places that we didn't serve in the Caribbean, St. Croix was one that kept popping up," Mr. Kopczak said.

St. Croix kept "popping up" because the data showed that many of Spirit's current destinations are home to many residents from St. Croix. It also showed that St. Croix is steadily peaking the interest of many people from the mainland who are looking for a vacation destination.

Mr. Kopczak said Spirit had planned to be here last year, but Hurricanes Irma and Maria hindered progress. During the site visit in January, however, the Spirit team was very impressed with the recovery efforts on the island and decided it was the opportune time to make a move.

VIPA has offered major incentives for Spirit too. They've waived landing fees for a year and discounted 50 percent of passenger fees. These incentives were offered through a program that was federally approved, according to VIPA Executive Director David Mapp.



Brandon Titre welcomes passengers to Spirit's inaugural

flight to St. Croix

Mr. Mapp announced VIPA's plans to expand both the St. Croix and St. Thomas airports in June and August, respectively, at the press conference. Improvements like these, he said, would benefit the airline.

Tourism has also agreed to promote Spirit flights to St. Croix in targeted cities across the mainland where the data points to a high volume of likely passengers, Mrs. Nicholson-Doty said. For example, passengers in Fort Lauderdale were able to witness a performance by international reggae artist and V.I. native Pressure Busspipe.

The Impact: What will Spirit do for the community?

Spirit will be bringing 25 new jobs to the St. Croix airport. The news came via Senior Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer Laurie Villa during Thursday's press conference.

In a separate interview, Ms. Villa said those jobs fall under the areas of customer service, baggage handling, and directing the planes out on the tarmac. There is also a position for a customer service manager. When asked about the opportunity for career growth with Spirit, Ms. Villa said the possibility existed for local employees.

Of the 25 job offerings, Spirit Media Relations Manager Stephen Schuler said that about 21 of them had already been filled.

In an effort to make a wider community impact, Spirit has also partnered with Project Promise VI – an organization dedicated to improving the lives of at-risk youth on St. Croix. A group from the organization is planning to tour cities within the U.S. and Spirit will be supporting them by providing flights, Ms. Villa said during the press conference.

A New Way to Travel – Unbundled Products/Services

When she learned she would be on the first ever Spirit flight to fly out of St. Croix, Keyara Greenidge said she was excited. But she shared one hang-up while waiting in the check-in line – a \$52 fee for a carry-on bag.

“I wasn’t expecting the baggage prices,” she said. “But, I mean, it’s fair, I guess, because we pay for our cheap flights.”

What Miss Greenidge referred to was the unbundling model that Spirit offers. According to Mr. Kopczak, this model allows the customer to pay only for the airline products and services that he or she needs. These products or services could include a checked bag or a carry-on bag.

“If it doesn’t make sense for them [the customers], and they have another fare with another airline, that’s great; they have that opportunity as well,” Kopczak said. “But the big thing is we provide a choice.”

Destinations, Schedules, & Flight Capacity

Spirit is now making travel between St. Croix and 20 different destinations available three times a week, year-round. These destinations include (<https://www.spirit.com/RouteMaps.aspx#>) :

- Atlanta, GA
- Atlantic City, NJ
- Baltimore, MD
- Chicago, ORD
- Columbus, OH
- Dallas, TX
- Denver, CO
- Detroit, MI
- Fort Lauderdale, FL (Non-stop)
- Las Vegas, NV
- Los Angeles, CA
- Managua, Nicaragua
- Myrtle Beach, SC
- New Orleans, LA
- New York, NY
- Niagara Falls, NY
- Orlando, FL
- Pittsburgh, PA
- San Pedro Sula, Honduras
- Tampa, FL

The only non-stop flight currently offered is to Fort Lauderdale. All other flights will be connecting over Fort Lauderdale.

So far, Spirit is carrying a maximum of 145 passengers to and from St. Croix. However, the possibility of carrying more passengers and of increasing the destination list exists if demand increases, Mr. Kopczak said.