

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Promising Punctuality, LIAT Returns To St. Thomas

Business / **Published On July 03, 2018 10:16 AM /**

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ST. THOMAS -- LIAT's first flight to the U.S. Virgin Islands in over a year arrived in St. Thomas on Monday, three months after [the airline announced](#) it would be returning to the territory but not St. Croix, citing profitability and performance issues with the route. Last year, The Consortium reported that the Antigua-based airline [would no longer offer flights to the USVI](#) and some other destinations, with the carrier stating back then: "These moves are intended to help stabilize the airline's flight schedule and network."

Sixteen months after LIAT's departure, the company appears to have improved delays in its routes that previously frustrated customers and battered its reputation.

"Three months ago, I was here happy to announce that we would be returning with a direct service, and I'm happy to report that LI 550 landed here at the Cyril E. King Airport at 12:28 p.m. with 38 passengers on board," Shavar Maloney, LIAT's corporate communications manager told members of the press and others following the airline's arrival on Monday. "I'm happy to report that the return flight, LI 551 -- we have a full flight with forty-eight passengers leaving.

Lt. Governor Osbert Potter delivered remarks at the event, stating, "This is a great day, this is a great day. I am extremely happy to welcome LIAT back to the territory. It personally broke my heart when LIAT discontinued their service last year, and I vouched that I would have done whatever I could have done as lieutenant governor to assist with their return to the territory."

According to Government House, Mr. Potter met with Customs and Border Patrol, Virgin Islands Port Authority officials, the U.S. Transportation Safety Administration, and officials from LIAT several times to bring the airline back to the USVI. Mr. Potter explained that LIAT's exit last year broke the connection Virgin Islanders mainly used to access other Caribbean islands further down the archipelago. This forced many residents to fly as far as Miami in order to get to the eastern Caribbean -- an investment that's often expensive and time-consuming.

"LIAT assured us that the old acronym of 'Leave Island Any Time' is out of the window," Mr. Potter added. Residents in the past also joked that rearranging the spelling of LIAT spells "LAIT", albeit not the proper spelling. The returning flight, arriving in Antigua, was delayed for over an hour due to LIAT's press conference at the airport. The airline had already given prior notice that a delay in its operations would occur, with Mr. Maloney stating earlier this year that "despite the challenges of a devastating hurricane season, we have improved our on-time performance and are working tirelessly to restoring connectivity throughout the region."

The airline reaffirmed that it would not be continuing flights to St. Croix, but did not rule out the possibility of resuming flights to the island in the future. LIAT further explained that it had canceled flights to the territory originally to focus on profitable routes and to fine tune its connections between islands. The airline didn't fully detail why it found St. Croix to be particularly unprofitable, however.

The return of LIAT comes six days after [the authority announced](#) bold plans to modernize the King and the Henry E. Rohlsen airports. Design concepts of a re-imagined St. Thomas terminal were revealed to the public at UVI's Sports and Fitness Center, with the inclusion of a ferry terminal at the port being the most talked about proposal. The new ferry terminal would allow arriving passengers to deplane and connect to an on-site ferry terminal in a matter of minutes.

After sustaining considerable damage from Hurricanes Irma and Maria in September, the airport has a blue roof, indoor walls covered in protective plastic, and other visible signs of damage as passengers traverse the terminal and its gates. V.I.P.A. officials and the private contractors exploring various modern enhancements to the airport on St. Thomas have stressed that renovations would not disrupt the normal flow of operations the facility. But with the airport operating with splinters in its infrastructure, it's unclear how ground crews, construction crews and airlines would conduct their daily tasks in such

close proximity.

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 earlier this year.

USVI Dept. of Tourism to help LIAT with marketing

During LIAT's press conference in March announcing its return, Dept. of Tourism Assistant Commissioner, Joyce Dore-Griffin, said D.O.T. would assist airline 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.