The Virgin Islands Consortium

29 Jets of Major Carriers Land in USVI Daily as Mainland Tourists Seek Getaways

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Three American Airline jets at the Cyril E. King Airport on Feb. 2, 2021. The USVI has seen strong travel demand during the pandemic, say tourism officials. By. ERNICE GILBRT FOR VI CONSORTIUM

The U.S. Virgin Islands is seeing on average twenty-nine new arrivals of the major airlines daily, with the split overwhelmingly favoring St. Thomas 24-5. That's on average 2,500 people into the territory daily, most of them tourists as Americans have been traveling in large numbers during spring break, with passenger volume reaching its highest in a year, according to the Wall Street Journal. The pent up demand for USVI travel comes as many international destinations remain closed, with tourist travel

between the U.S. and Europe very limited.

According to data provided to the Consortium by the V.I. Port Authority, St. Thomas sees twenty-four major airline flights daily, while St. Croix is averaging five. The breakdown is as follows:

St. Thomas:

- Delta : 7
- Spirit 3
- American 8
- United 2
- Jetblue 3
- Frontier 1

St. Croix:

- American 3
- Spirit 1
- Delta 1

According to Port Authority officials, jets at the Cyril E. King Airport are waiting in line to take off similarly to the extremely busy airports on the mainland. Sometimes the jets wait twenty minutes on the tarmac before a gate can be cleared because of the high traffic. The increased demand is creating problems for V.I.P.A., but Executive Director Carlton Dowe described the strain as a "good problem" that V.I.P.A. is managing.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently eased travel restrictions for people fully vaccinated against Covid-19, stating that inoculated individuals can travel safely without putting themselves at risk so long as they continue to wear mask and take other safety precautions.

The announcement follows recent data from studies showing that the Covid-19 vaccines have proven effective in real-world conditions at reducing risk of infection.

But the CDC continues to dissuade travel, pointing to an ever growing list of variants and rising Covid cases in the U.S. and around the world. “It’s our responsibility at the CDC to look at the evolving evidence of what is lower risk to do when you are fully vaccinated,” said CDC Director Rochelle Walensky Friday. “I would advocate against general travel overall."

How the influx of tourists to the USVI will impact the territory's Covid-19 fight is yet to manifest. The V.I. Dept. of Health continues to urge safety and said while new variants had not yet been detected locally, they would eventually arrive. Last month D.O.H. Territorial Epidemiologist Dr. Esther Ellis, said, "If you are not fully vaccinated you cannot take your guard down at this time. The recent increase in new cases is a reminder that you must be vigilant when you're outside your household, especially if you live with

someone who is immunocompromised or elderly." She encouraged residents to continue wearing masks, washing hands and social distancing, adding, "The quicker we can get the territory vaccinated, the quicker we can get past this very long year."

The latest Covid-19 data provided by D.O.H. reflects April 1 statistics, showing 58 total cases led by St. Thomas with 29, followed by St. Croix with 28, and St. John with one active case. D.O.H. has stopped providing the data through text messages, though why the department ended the messages was unknown at time of writing.

Governor Albert Bryan has been asked on a number of occasions about the impact of tourists on the territory relative to Covid-19, but Mr. Bryan has said Virgin Islanders were the ones spreading the disease locally. He once pointed to a wedding of Virgin Islanders that took place in Florida, and said some persons who attended and returned to the territory brought with them the virus. The governor has also blasted entertainment events.

"At least one wedding in Florida that we are tracking, there are already four individuals who have tested positive for Covid-19," Mr. Bryan said during a December 2020 press briefing. "These are Virgin Islanders who have traveled abroad, contracted the virus, and have brought it back here to the Virgin Islands to their friends and family."

"I don't know what people are thinking. Parties in the middle of the night, charter activities — it just has to stop," the governor added, toning his voice to convey the seriousness of the matter.

For its part, the V.I. Department of Tourism has lauded the increase in air travel and stated in a release issued Saturday that it plans on elevating its marketing efforts — a move aimed at attracting even more visitors. “With positive developments related to travel trends, the growing availability of Covid-19 vaccines, and demand for USVI getaways, the Department of Tourism has a strong charge to boost our sales, marketing, advertising and public relations activities,” Mr. Boschulte said. Tourism represents 60 percent of the USVI's gross domestic product, according to D.O.T.

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