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Severe Flight Shortages Between St. Thomas and St. Croix Continues as Carriers Struggle to Retain Pilots, Face Other Issues

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Cape Air has been struggling to retain pilots for its USVI operations, leading to a drastic reduction of flights from April 2022 to present. By. CAPE AIR/NANTUCKET AIRLINES.

Earlier in the year it was relatively simple to secure a flight between St. Thomas and St. Croix if booked at a reasonable time. Now, catching a flight between the islands has become a frustrating task as the carriers continue to experience pilot separations among other issues, resulting in a large number of cancellations.

According to the V.I. Port Authority, Cape Air, which as early as March provided 60 flights daily between St. Thomas, St. Croix and San Juan, Puerto Rico, has drastically reduced its operations to

approximately 10 flights daily between STT, STX and San Juan.

"Cape Air is cancelling 70 percent of its flights," the Port Authority made known upon a request from the Consortium. "The reduction occurred from April 2022 to current." VIPA said that during the Covid-19 pandemic, only San Juan, PR flights were affected.

The main reason for the cancellations according to VIPA is pilot separations. The authority said Cape Air is currently impacted by a 60 percent pilot shortage, many of whom either retire or move on to more lucrative offerings. Another 5 percent of Cape Air pilots are out on sick leave, and the carrier also has to contend with mechanical issues affecting its operations, according to the Port Authority.

VIPA Executive Director Carlton Dowe said the pilot shortage problem is a nationwide issue affecting all airlines. "They continue tell us that they have a serious shortage of pilots," Mr. Dowe said, referring to Cape Air. "They can't get the pilots quick enough; they bring folks down here and as they get trained, sometimes by the time they get seasoned in they might leave. The fact is they continue to tell us that even on island they only have a few pilots that really live here, and that's been a challenge."

Major airlines with deeper pockets than their smaller counterparts have been hiring employees at a rapid pace to meet post-pandemic travel demands, leaving carriers such as Cape Air adversely impacted.

According to [the Wall Street Journal](#), which cited new projections by consulting firm Oliver Wyman, global pilot demand is on track to surpass supply in 2024. WSJ said that in North America this point has already been crossed as the pandemic accelerated retirements, and airlines are now rushing to rehire thousands of employees at breakneck speed, which is pushing up labor costs. Oliver Wyman forecasts a 29,000 pilot shortage in the region by 2032.

Seaborne Airlines, owned by Silver Airways, no longer provide flights at the airport between St. Thomas and St. Croix; only St. Thomas to Puerto Rico and St. Croix to Puerto Rico. The carrier's Seaplane operation — which VIPA says [will lose its exclusivity to the seaplane port upon expiration of the current agreement](#) — has only one seaplane in operation, according to VIPA. Seaborne has cancelled an entire day of flights following mechanical issues suffered by the carrier's only operational plane.

Seaflight, which operates flights from the airports between St. Thomas and St. Croix, had temporarily suspended its services as its plane faced mechanical issues, according to VIPA.