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Strengthening Virgin Islands Connectivity: Fly the Whale's Vision for Seamless, Affordable Inter-Island Travel

Travel / **Published On May 04, 2023 06:43 AM /**

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Fly the Whale CEO Omer ErSalcuk takes unifying tone as he builds a company by and for Virgin Islanders. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

Omer ErSalcuk wants to focus on making it easier for people to travel from one airport in the USVI to the other. Expanding inter-island airlift capacity, says the Fly the Whale CEO, is key to unlocking the territory's hidden potential. His goal is for the airline to be the engine for that expansion, firmly establishing itself as a service by Virgin Islanders for Virgin Islanders.

"We can tie together the Virgin Islands again," Mr. ErSalcuk told Consortium journalists, as he explained why Fly the Whale wanted to take a collaborative approach to developing its operations.

“We’re not interested in going into international,” the airline CEO said, asserting that Fly the Whale was not intending to compete with any of the operators currently flying in the territory. “We want to provide something that doesn’t exist today.”

That something, he believes, is frequent, reliable service between St. Thomas and St. Croix that are as frictionless as possible. “Fast, friendly, and fun” is the goal, ErSalcuk says. “We’re going to do just simple St. Thomas, St. Croix...you can easily get on, you can easily book, you can easily check in.”

As demand grows, Mr. ErSalcuk says the aim is to add capacity to meet it. “The more flights we add, the more we spread out our overhead and it allows us to keep our fares lower.” Ensuring that fares stay affordable is a major focus for Fly the Whale, he says. “You need to balance pricing between what the market can support and what you need to run a sustainable business that can invest in itself and continue to grow.”

The St. Croix-St. Thomas route is so underserved that his airline’s entrance into the market should not hinder anyone else from operating in the space, the airline CEO said. “We are not a threat to Cape Air, we are not a threat to Silver. They do what they do very well, and we want them to continue to grow flights, even flights between St. Thomas and St. Croix.” What Fly the Whale hopes to do, is to establish a collaborative relationship between carriers to ensure that the efficiency of traveling that commuter route is not compromised.

“I would like to reach out to both Cape Air and Silver and Seaborne and say, if you guys have a flight that you have more people than you can put on it, or bags, we will work with you so that together we can better serve the market...and vice versa. If we have a flight that we have to cancel and we have passengers that we need to put on, we want to be able to reach out to Cape Air and Silver and say we’ve got some people, would you be able to accommodate them?”

Mr. ErSalcuk, who worked with Seaborne Airlines in senior positions for over a decade, spending years as chief executive officer, says that this kind of collaboration to strengthen the inter-island air link will not only improve the day to day lives of Virgin Islanders, but also benefit the territory’s tourism economy.

“It’s very hard for the VI to compete with other destinations because everything is marketed separately. St. John and St. Thomas are sort of marketed together. St. Croix is sort of marketing differently,” he noted. But as both Governor Albert Bryan Jr. and Tourism Commissioner Joseph Boschulte recently argued, that challenge turns into an advantage when “we tie together our islands as one destination,” according to Mr. ErSalcuk.

This is done, the airline exec argues, by getting the experience of “island-hopping” as close to its literal meaning as possible. “Working with the other carriers...the more powerful the VI gets,” he declared. “The more big aircraft from the big carriers will come in here because somebody can fly in St. Thomas, spend four days in St. Thomas, in St. John, and then finish their vacation in St. Croix because it’s easy to get here and it’s not stressful.”

Mr. ErSalcuk also touched on safety concerns. “Our aircraft are new aircraft, and the engines are new engines,” he emphasized. He spoke of the company’s commitment to maintenance and the adherence to federal aviation regulations. “The Cessna Caravan is the most utilized commuter aircraft in the world. There are thousands of them out there....And it is one of the safest aircraft to operate,” he argued. Mr. ErSalcuk referenced an airline which has been operating a commuter service in Hawaii for approximately two decades without incident as an example for why people

should not be overly concerned about the Fly the Whale aircraft traveling over open water.

At the end of the day, Mr. ErSalcuk says Fly The Whale is a Virgin Islands company trying to fulfill an unmet need. “Every time one of our guests flies on us, they're investing in the future of a VI based carrier. That's what we want to build.”

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