

Direct Air adds service between Rockford, Punta Gorda

Photos

Photos



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Direct Air's flights will use new Virgin America planes, featuring mood lighting, in-seat entertainment centers and a first-class area.

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ROCKFORD — Direct Air doesn't just want to get you from Rockford to the Fort Myers, Fla., area. It wants to get people to the Rockford area, too.

How to get tickets

Tickets for Direct Air's service from Rockford to Fort Myers/Punta Gorda, Fla., can be purchased online at visitdirectair.com or by calling 877-432-3473. Flights are Mondays and Fridays from Dec. 22 through March 6. Also, members of the airport's MilesAhead rewards club will receive promotional e-mails this week giving them chances for discounts on the service. To sign up, go to flyrfd.com.

Direct Air, a scheduled charter airline, formally announced today service between Chicago Rockford International Airport and Punta Gorda, 30 minutes northwest of Fort Myers. Twice-weekly flights will start Dec. 22 and last through March 6. If there's a lot of demand, service could be extended into the spring.

Already, more than 500 of the 5,000 seats available have been sold, airport officials said.

Direct Air's flights will use new Virgin America planes, featuring mood lighting, in-seat entertainment centers and a first-class area.

"It's like walking into a nightclub," Direct Air President Ed Warneck said.

Warneck said while major airlines cut back amid high fuel prices and economic uncertainty, smaller operations can step in and gain market share.

"People do not want to go through major airports. They hate dealing with it — long lines, parking fees,

delays," Warneck said. "If you have a five-day vacation, you only relax for three."

Eventually, Direct Air would like to add more flights from Rockford, to Punta Gorda and to new destinations. That could include the airline's home base in Myrtle Beach, S.C., as soon as next spring.

Direct Air — formerly Myrtle Beach Direct Air — was formed in 2006 with several veterans of airline and other industries. Its CEO, Judy Tull, is former operations manager for the defunct Hooters Air, which used to serve the Rockford airport.

Warneck said Direct Air is different from Hooters and other smaller airlines because of its focus on marketing hotels, restaurants and other businesses at its destinations.

The airline has expanded aggressively. Last year, it served three cities and 67,000 passengers. This year, it serves 11 cities and more than 200,000 passengers.

Warneck would even like to market the Rockford airport as a convenient way to get to the Chicago region. Rockford- and Chicago-area businesses could advertise to customers in other markets, and even on the flights themselves.

Warneck said the airline has been interested in Rockford since it formed in 2006. The proximity to the Chicago area makes Rockford a good fit for the company's model, he said, which is linking secondary airports to avoid direct competition with major airlines.

Warneck said he's been approached by two dozen airports looking to add Direct Air this year, but the company only chose a handful. He said Rockford was one of them because of the passenger potential and because airport officials plan to cooperate on the marketing side.

The airport waived landing fees for the airline, which would save it about \$5,000 for the spring. Airport officials also committed to marketing the new destination as part of its existing marketing budget.

This is the airport's third airline and sixth destination. Allegiant Air serves Rockford year-round, and Apple Vacations flies to Cancun in the winter.

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