

Sun Country lands at PGD

Competitor Allegiant's first flight from Minneapolis arrives a few hours later

By BETSY CALVERT

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PUNTA GORDA — Friday was the first day in four years that two airlines have operated out of Punta Gorda Airport. The first 165 passengers from the Minneapolis airport arrived at 12:30 p.m. Friday on Sun Country Airlines' inaugural flight to Punta Gorda. A few hours later, Allegiant Airlines' first flight from the same airport arrived. "Our community is excited about welcoming new visitors from Minnesota to sunny Southwest Florida," Airport Chief Executive Officer James Parish said in a press release. New arrivals were greeted by boxes of free oranges and other PGD knickknacks.

Minneapolis-based Sun Country announced last fall that the airline would compete with Allegiant at Punta Gorda Airport, adding this warm weather site to its list of cold weather escape routes. Sun Country's ultra low cost model is similar to Allegiant's. Chief Executive Officer Jude Bricker was Allegiant's chief operating officer until 2016. He is credited with promoting the cost-saving model of using small cities and excluding certain days of the week in the schedule. Sun Country first set its target date for PGD in December. But in late June, Las Vegas based Allegiant announced it would also start a new route from the airport in Minneapolis. Allegiant's first flight would be in October, Florida's down season.

Within hours, a Minneapolis news site reported that Sun Country had bumped up its first flight to early October as well. Sun County Communications Manager Erin Blanton said the airline decided to move the flight up a few months due to increasing demand for leisure travel, and the nearly full flight proves that the demand is there. "We know folks are looking for convenience, a great experience and more variety at an affordable fare as they plan their next vacation," Blanton said. "By offering this service earlier in the fall, we're able to do just that, while connecting our guests through MSP and PGD before the busy holiday season. It's really exciting to see this reflected on today's flight."

The last time there were two airlines was 2017 when Frontier was flying out of PGD, Miller said. Before that, a charter air service Direct Air operated along with Allegiant until it shut down in 2012. Both Allegiant and Sun Country are now operating flights between Minneapolis and Punta Gorda on Monday and Fridays to start, adding more days during the winter months. A review of both airlines' websites show that a trip from Minneapolis on Nov. 1, returning Nov. 5, would cost \$39 each way for both airlines. Both airlines are ultra low cost airlines that focus on direct flights. Sun Country does offer connecting flights while Allegiant does not.

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