

New Nonstop Flight From the U.S. Makes Greenland Feel More Within Reach

FROM FIRST BUSINESS PAGE

United flew a Boeing 737 Max 8 on its first flight here, carrying 157 passengers.

United's seasonal flights, which were announced before Mr. Trump's election, are an important experiment for the airline and for Greenland. United is one of the first foreign carriers to take advantage of the new runway, with twice-weekly flights from Newark through late September, but Greenland wants more to follow suit. Officials hope to make the island a hub for Arctic tourism and expect to complete two similar airport projects next year.

"It's an answer to the question of what will the Arctic be living off in the future and how can we think about economies that are less extractive," said Carina Ren, a professor and tourism researcher at Aalborg University in Denmark who lived in Nuuk from age 12 to 16.

The government of Greenland, which has stopped exploring for oil and taken a cautious approach to mining, embraced tourism in recent years. Officials here hope that opening the door to a few more flights and tourists could help the economy without the downsides that come with being swamped by too many visitors.

The territory aims to attract travelers from all over the world, but reaching the largely untapped American market has long been a goal, said Jens Lauridsen, the chief executive of Greenland Airports. And there is a lot of room to grow. Last year, about 2,600 Americans visited Greenland by plane, and 47,500 visited by cruise ship.

"It has been for us as an airport, but also for Greenland as a country, a strong wish to strengthen our connection to North America," he said in an interview.

In Nuuk, which is about 200 miles south of the Arctic Circle, the new 2,200-meter runway and airport terminal are poised to supercharge the local economy.

The Hotel Hans Egede, one of the main hotels in town, is working on opening a fourth location, which will be close to the airport. Nuuk Water Taxi, which operated the whale safari that Ms. Johnson, Mr. Ngai and their daughter took, is adding a new boat, Ice Force Four.

Greenland is home to fewer than 60,000 people and has only 13 airports, which serve tourists and residents often traveling on helicopters or small planes that carry a few dozen passengers. The few airports where larger planes can land are not necessarily in places



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONY CENICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

A United Airlines flight in Nuuk, Greenland, last month, and the Church of Our Savior in Nuuk, built in the mid-19th century, right. The territory has had a longtime goal of luring more U.S. tourists and strengthening a "connection to North America," a Greenland Airports official said.

that tourists want to visit in great numbers. In 2007, Air Greenland began flying from Baltimore to a former U.S. military base in Kangerlussuaq, a few hundred miles north of Nuuk. After losing money on the route, the airline canceled the flights less than a year later.

United hopes to do better in Nuuk. The airline is the smallest of the four large U.S. carriers, but has a lucrative business flying internationally. American Airlines operated more international flights from the United States than any other airline last year, but United flew to more foreign airports, according to Cirium, an aviation data firm. And flights to new destinations like Greenland can buttress United's reputation with travelers, especially people who are looking for novel and exciting places to visit.

"There's definitely a tangible benefit in having inspirational and aspirational destinations, and I think Greenland just fits that de-

scription," said Patrick Quayle, United's senior vice president of global network planning and alliances. He was on the first flight to Nuuk and spent much of it in the aisle talking to passengers.

That flight was the airline's fastest-selling inaugural seasonal flight, he said. And sales for the remaining flights this summer have been strong so far, an early sign that the airline will return next summer.

United spent months preparing for the foray into Greenland.

In December, members of a team that oversees United's operations across Europe, the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia visited Nuuk for the first time to tour the airport and meet local officials and business partners. The team visited again multiple times before the first flight.

One big challenge was apparent early. There were no caterers in Nuuk licensed to supply food for commercial flights, so United worked with one to get the certi-



fication it needed from the Danish aviation authority. The process took longer than expected, so United was planning to provide shelf-stable items on the first return flight to New York. But days before the flights began, the license came through, allowing United to start offering warm meals like mussels or pasta, chicken and mashed potatoes and a Thai coconut vegetable curry.

United also worked with the Hotel Hans Egede to make sure that its rooms were secure for the pi-

lots and flight attendants who might stay there and that the hotel's blackout curtains worked well against the nearly 24 hours of sunlight that Nuuk gets in the summer.

Because the airline is flying to Greenland only for three months, United outsourced some local functions to Air Greenland, including passenger check-ins, baggage loading and removal, and plane maintenance.

There were nearly three dozen United staff members on site to

'It's kind of this elusive destination to get to.'

Eugene Ngai, for whom a direct route was a game-changer.

kick off the first flights. But soon the airline will have just one permanent employee: a Nuuk station manager who normally works at United's hub in Newark.

Some seasonal flights, like those to destinations in Southern Europe, are among United's most profitable, the airline's chief executive, Scott Kirby, recently told investors. Others, like a route from Newark to Bergen, Norway, in the summer of 2022, have been unsuccessful. But there's little risk to testing routes, Mr. Kirby said.

"You fly a flight to Nuuk and it doesn't work, you don't fly it next season," he said. "But most of the experiments have worked out."

The Greenland flights have attracted certain kinds of travelers — people interested in the outdoors and stunning, stark landscapes. That includes United's own employees, like one of the two pilots of the first United flight, Miles Morgan.

"I've been obsessed with Nuuk for about a decade now," he said in an announcement just before taking off from Newark. "I dabble in landscape photography, so the opportunity to go and see this as part of the inaugural is truly special."

Mr. Morgan, who is also the managing director of United's Flight Training Center, in Denver, flew home the next day, but said in an interview that he planned to return as a passenger next summer.

Many passengers on that first flight were eager to visit Greenland for the first time, but for some the flight was an opportunity to return to the island. Justin Herman lived here about two decades ago, working as a public affairs officer for the U.S. Air Force Space Command, based at Pituffik Space Base, in an isolated and frigid part of the island almost 1,000 miles north of Nuuk.

Mr. Herman, who lives in Washington now, arrived with loose plans for his five days in Nuuk. He spent his first night making new friends at a bar and left the next day for a remote camping trip. He was thrilled to be back.

"It was in my dreams for years after I lived here," he said. "There's a profound beauty and depth."