

Aloha, Southwest! Airline opens interisland service to Hilo

By MICHAEL BRESTOVANSKY Hawaii Tribune-Herald | Monday, January 20, 2020, 12:05 a.m.

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A Southwest Airlines plane is blessed by Kahu Daniel "Kaniela" Akaka Jr. as pilot Joseph "Makoa" Reid looks on. (Tim Wright/Special to the Tribune-Herald)

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More than 100 passengers were greeted with cheers and songs Sunday morning after disembarking Southwest Airlines' first flight from Honolulu to Hilo.

Arriving around 9 a.m. Sunday with the faintest of rainbows overhead, the flight was the first of a new regular route that will travel between Hilo and Honolulu four times daily in each direction.

"This is going to be a real game-changer for Hilo," said Ross Birch, executive director of the Island of Hawaii Visitors Bureau. "It's going to change our whole perspective on tourism....Having two airlines already is great, Hawaiian and United are both great, but Southwest is something else."

The new Hilo-Honolulu route is one of several new routes that Southwest opened over the weekend, said Andrew Watterson, Southwest's executive vice president and chief commercial officer. Daily service between Kailua-Kona and Maui also began on Sunday, as did alternating daily service from Kailua-Kona to San Jose and Oakland — San Jose flights are offered Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, with Oakland flights on the remaining days of the week.

More than 2,000 people attended a festival at the Grand Naniloa Hotel welcoming Southwest to Hilo on Saturday. Naniloa general manager Ed Gunderson said the success of the event on Saturday was a sign that "the community is really reaching out to embrace Southwest."

The air of festivity extended into Sunday, with free food and live music welcoming the first travelers from Honolulu as Southwest and county officials looked on. Watterson commended the community's "overwhelming response" to Southwest's arrival and said he looks forward to serving Hilo.

"Forgive the language, but all I can say is 'what took you so goddamn long?'" joked Mayor Harry Kim before the plane arrived.

Kim went on to say that Southwest finally lives up to its name, as it now serves the southernmost airport in the United States, in the westernmost state in the nation.

Watterson said that although Sunday morning flights are not typically the airline's most crowded flights, about 140 passengers boarded the first flight from Honolulu, filling about 80 percent of the airplane — all of Southwest's Hawaii flights use a Boeing 737-800, which seats 175.

Some of the passengers were travelers simply seeking a flight to Hilo, but some arrived specifically because of brand loyalty to the airline itself. Erie, Penn., residents Tim and Holly Klan said they have attended all 39 of Southwest's city openings in the last nine years with their son Mark.

"We enjoy it, we love Southwest's hospitality, and they throw a party in both airports, and on the plane," Holly said. "If we're going to go to a new place, you might as well go on the first day and have a party."

"If it's important enough for Southwest to come here, it's important enough for us to come here," Tim added.

After the plane landed — to cheers from onlookers — 100 passengers boarded the first flight from Hilo to Honolulu. One of them, Baltimore resident Keith Boone, said he had simply booked a flight to take him back to Honolulu so he could return home from vacation and hadn't expected the festivities.

"I always fly with Southwest, because they're the main airline on the east coast," Boone said. "And then the hotel had a whole festival for Southwest yesterday."

Amid the cheers, nobody seemed more affected by the occasion than the pilot, Joseph "Makoa" Reid. Reid, a Southwest pilot for 26 years, specifically requested to make the inaugural flight because of his 30 years of roots in Hamakua. Although he worked with Hawaiian Airlines in the past, he had never landed in Hilo before Sunday.

“Getting to fly back here with my airline, with my equipment,” Reid said. “This is my singular moment in time...The singular moment of my entire aviation career.”

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