Southwest delivers 5 nonstop flights



Southwest's arrival in the Upstate is expected to stem some of the loss of potential traffic to nearby airports. The airline will offer five direct flights from GSP.

KEN OSBURN / Staff

'Upstate really gets what Southwest can do for the economy'

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Southwest Airlines officials rolled into the Upstate on Wednesday aboard one of the carrier's Canyon Blue 737s to announce service to Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport would begin in March with introductory fares as low as $59.

It may as well have been angels' wings to local travelers weary of paying some of America's highest fares to hop on a regional jet for a connecting flight in Charlotte or Atlanta.

Dave Ridley, vice president of marketing and revenue management for the Texas-based airline, said Southwest would bring "its big jets and low fares" to five markets with seven daily departures when it begins service at GSP on March 11.

Wednesday's celebration of a successful courtship of Southwest began in Stevens Aviation Hangar 1 at GSP, where state and local officials, business and community leaders gathered for the carrier's announcement of its start date, fares, destinations and other plans for the Upstate.

Southwest will offer nonstop flights from GSP to Baltimore/Washington, Chicago Midway, Nashville, Houston Hobby, and Orlando.

Those five non-stops, Ri-

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Southwest Airlines flights out of GSP



SUZIE RIDDLE / Staff

SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

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dley said, can turn into 63 more locations on the Southwest network across the country.

The airline will kick off introductory one-way fares of $59 to Nashville and Baltimore/Washington; $79 to Orlando, and $99 to Chicago/Midway and Houston. He said all other points in the system will be between $109 and $149 one way.

The introductory fares are good until the end of this year for travel between March 13 and May 25.

Travelers will barely notice the difference when those fares go away, Ridley said. "They'll go up a little bit, but I assure you low fares are here to stay in the Upstate," he said.

Southwest announced in May that it intends to serve Greenville and Charleston without any government subsidies.

Joe Erwin, president of Greenville's Erwin Penland ad agency, said the campaign to attract Southwest to the Upstate involved a unified team of Upstate businesses, political bodies, non-profits and other groups.

He said more than 200 companies in the Upstate pledged to put a large percentage of their travel with Southwest if they agreed to come to GSP.

"We wanted Southwest real bad," said Sam Konduros, chair-elect of the Greater Greenville Chamber of Commerce, who had introduced a video to help make the Upstate's case to Southwest.

"This was the crowning piece, designed to convince Southwest Airlines emotionally perhaps, how we really felt about them and how the people in our region felt about making Southwest part of our Upstate family," he said.

Some people in the video said they fly out of Charlotte because of high fares at GSP. "You get ripped off and it's not fair," one woman said.

Southwest was sought to entice a low-fare carrier to the region in an effort to lower fares, stem some of the loss of potential traffic to nearby airports and perhaps add more direct destinations.

High fares are a major reason given by many who fly out of the Charlotte or Atlanta airports instead of GSP

The airlines will "absolutely" be a game changer for the entire Upstate, said Dave Edwards, chief executive officer of GSP.

He said passengers will not only benefit from low fares and additional destinations, "but we've already heard from those working in the area of economic development that they are getting calls from business and industry groups from around the country that would never have considered the Upstate without Southwest Airlines."



KEN OSBURN / Staff

Dave Ridley, a vice president at Southwest Airlines, looks over an aircraft with Minor Shaw, vice chair of the Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport Commission.

Rosylin Weston, spokeswoman for GSP, said that on July 1, the average daily fares coming out of GSP were: walk up with a three-day stay, $756; seven-day advance purchase with a three-day stay, $637; 14-day advance purchase with a three-day stay, $500; and 21-day advance purchase with a three-day stay, $449.

Southwest made a grand entrance Wednesday. With Lenny Kravitz's "Fly Away" playing in the background, the hangar doors were opened and Southwest's blue and red Boeing 737, with orange lettering and gold trim, rolled up.

Southwest employees, including Ridley, as well as Edwards and GSP Commission Vice Chairwoman Minor Shaw came out of the plane and approached the stage in front of an audience standing and applauding.

The reception at GSP is at the "top end" of what Southwest has gotten over the years, Ridley said.

"I've done many similar announcements and communities are always excited, but I think in particular, Greenville, Spartanburg and the Upstate really gets what Southwest can do for the economy," he said.

He said the airline can help bring companies here and bring people to vacation here who otherwise couldn't afford it.

He said Southwest doesn't charge anything for passengers' bags, there is no fee to book a last-minute frequent flier award, and Southwest is the only airline that doesn't charge its passengers $150 to change their reservations when their plans change.

"There is also no charge for soft drinks, snacks and smiles," Ridley said.

Based in Dallas, Southwest started its service in 1971, flying to three cities in the state of Texas.

Southwest, which now serves 69 cities in 35 states, built its business around the principles of love and the Golden Rule — "to treat our customers and each other the way that we would like to be treated," Ridley said.

That's a reason the company's common stock is traded under the symbol "LUV" on the New York Stock Exchange.

Ridley said people in the Upstate will see that love aboard Southwest's Boeing 737 jets — the only aircraft the carrier currently flies.

"Southwest Airlines doesn't fly regional jets," Ridley said.

To celebrate the addition of Greenville-Spartanburg and Charleston to the Southwest network, the airline is offering a special two-day fare sale only on southwest.com.

Through 11:59 p.m. PDT on Thursday, Oct. 21, customers can find fares as low as $30 one way to any nonstop market to/from Charleston and GSP for travel through April 6, 2011.

When the $30 fare sale ends, customers still will be able to book fares as low as $59 one way for travel every day except Fridays and Sundays from March 14, 2011, through May 25, 2011.