

Lufthansa hopes to expand Frankfurt flight from St. Louis as passengers pack seats.

By: Victor Stefanescu , Jack Suntrup: St. Louis Post Dispatch



Tim Samer and his son Neal Samer, 10, from Switzerland, wait to board their Lufthansa flight with direct service from St. Louis Lambert International Airport to Frankfurt on Friday, Aug. 11, 2023. The Samers were visiting family in Missouri and were happy when direct service between St. Louis and Germany began last year.

David Carson, Post-Dispatch

Tim Samer's parents live near Frankfurt, Germany. Bethany Foresman's family is more than 4,500 miles away in Jefferson City. The couple lives in Geneva, Switzerland and they've made journeys between the two cities for 15 years. It used to be a hassle.

That changed with last summer, when German airline Lufthansa took off for Frankfurt from St. Louis in June 2022, marking the first nonstop flight

to mainland Europe since American Airlines bought Trans World Airlines and downsized operations at St. Louis Lambert International Airport in the 2000s, obliterating passenger traffic.

“I joke that we could get to Australia from Europe faster than we can get to my parents in Jefferson City, Missouri,” Foresman said. “But, that's not true anymore.”



Enis Tatar, 20, left, greets family friend Nermina Fazlic after Tatar cleared customs after flying direct from Frankfurt, Germany, to St. Louis Lambert International Airport on Friday, Aug. 11, 2023. Tatar was born here but moved to Germany when he was young.

David Carson, Post-Dispatch

Between July 1, 2022 and June 30 more than 65,000 passengers flew into and out of St. Louis through the route, according to an airport official. The thrice-weekly outbound flights were around 86% full during their first 11 months, said airport director Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge.



St. Louis Lambert International Airport Director Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge.
David Carson, Post-Dispatch

In July, they were 97.7% full. She credits the high percentage of seats sold to leisure travelers, and the support of area businesses, for the flight's popularity.

“I also think it's the fact — and this has been proven over and over — if a nonstop market is put in and there's demand, your demand is going to grow even above the numbers you think,” Hamm-Niebruegge said.

It's so popular that Jason Hall, the chief executive officer of Greater St. Louis Inc., a regional booster that pledged half of \$5 million in incentives to attract the Lufthansa flight, said he hopes to see the route expand to five or seven days per week.

Lufthansa is considering that expansion. The nine-hour flight is well above the financial break-even point, said Don Bunkenburg, Lufthansa's director

of sales for the Central and Western United States. _



_ Lufthansa ticket counter agent Karena Hoult, center, gives directions to passengers checking baggage for their direct flight from St. Louis Lambert International Airport to Frankfurt, Germany, on Friday, Aug. 11, 2023.

David Carson, Post-Dispatch

Travelers heading to and from Europe for business, fun and family told the Post-Dispatch the flight chopped the length of their voyages by four or five hours and helped them avoid connection pains.

“When you have kids, it's incredibly important because you save so much time just managing energy and preventing meltdowns,” Foresman said.

More than a year ago, Hall, Hamm-Niebruegge and regional leaders had gathered at Lambert to mark the first flight with a celebration. Justyna Pas, of Webster Groves, was on that flight. Every year, she travels to her birth country of Poland and she took the flight again this summer.

“Usually you connect in a large city like Chicago,” Pas said last week, after arriving at Lambert. “There are huge lines and a lot of stress, a lot of running around. So this is perfect.”

Heybet Sun, 50, of St. Charles, goes to Turkey for a month each year with family. Return flights would often require them to wait in a line at customs for more than an hour. In St. Louis, he said, it only took 15 minutes.

“We need more international flights, not just this one,” Sun said.

The Frankfurt flight is putting St. Louis on the international map, said Kevin O’Malley, chairman of the St. Louis County Port authority, which also pledged \$2.5 million in incentives.

“A city the size of St. Louis with the number of international companies that we have here, not to have an international carrier was a negative that we needed to correct,” O’Malley said.

Bunkenburg said St. Louis had long been on Lufthansa's radar, but conversations about a new route accelerated after the chief executive of Bayer — the German pharmaceutical giant with a large plant science operation in the St. Louis region — told the airline's CEO to consider the city as a destination more intensely.



Passengers line up to begin boarding their Lufthansa flight direct from St. Louis Lambert International Airport to Frankfurt on Friday, Aug. 11, 2023. The Airbus A330-300 that Lufthansa flies to St. Louis offers business class, premium economy, and economy class seats.

David Carson, Post-Dispatch

Nearly 1,500 Bayer employees have taken 5,300 flights in the past 12 months, the company said.

“Bayer has been a significant user of these flights and it has benefited not only Bayer and its employees, but also many of those in the region, restoring a direct-to-Europe option from St. Louis,” said Jacqueline Applegate, president of Bayer Crop Science, North America, in a statement to the Post-Dispatch.

Nearly 1,500 Bayer employees have taken 5,300 flights in the past 12 months, the company said.

“Bayer has been a significant user of these flights and it has benefited not only Bayer and its employees, but also many of those in the region,

restoring a direct-to-Europe option from St. Louis,” said Jacqueline Applegate, president of Bayer Crop Science, North America, in a statement to the Post-Dispatch.

Michael Hilton, a Bayer director from Eureka, was recently traveling to Germany for meetings. He’s traveled the new route several times and says it’s always packed. “When I get on the plane, I see my colleagues often,” he said.

The Post-Dispatch reported in 2022 that businesses such as Centene, Emerson and Enterprise Holdings also backed the effort.



Lufthansa pilots prepare their Airbus A330-300 for a direct flight from St. Louis Lambert International Airport to Frankfurt on Friday, Aug. 11, 2023.

David Carson, Post-Dispatch

Hall said in a recent speech that the Frankfurt flight had been a “game changer” for Israeli company ICL Group, which broke ground earlier this month on a \$400 million project in the city’s Carondelet neighborhood to manufacture a component for electric vehicles.

Hall said he'd spoken with ICL CEO Raviv Zoller in 2021, when they and others celebrated the opening of a plant protein production facility the company had constructed in south St. Louis.

“We know it was important to you to secure with Lufthansa Group that first nonstop air service from St. Louis to continental Europe in over 20 years,” Hall said to Zoller at the recent ICL groundbreaking. “Your team described that to us as a game changer, and if we got that right, more was to come. And you have delivered on that partnership.”



Ramon Lopez checks make sure the cabin service is complete before passengers begin boarding Lufthansa's next direct flight from St. Louis Lambert International Airport to Frankfurt on Friday, Aug. 11, 2023.

David Carson, Post-Dispatch