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George C. Ford

George Ford has spent decades covering business news across Eastern Iowa. Ford is a native of Lexington, Ky., but has [...]

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Allegiant plans flights from Cedar Rapids to Punta Gorda

Florida destination will become Allegiant's fifth nonstop flight from Eastern Iowa Airport

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Eastern Iowans have been clamoring for direct flights from Cedar Rapids to southwest Florida, and a Las Vegas-based airline plans to launch service later this year.

Allegiant Air will offer twice-weekly nonstop jet service between The Eastern Iowa Airport and Punta Gorda, Fla., beginning Dec. 18. Allegiant will introduce the new service with fares as low as \$99.99 each way, which are not available on all flights.

Tickets must be purchased by Aug. 6 for travel by Feb. 11, 2014. Flight days and times can be found at www.allegiant.com.

Punta Gorda is roughly halfway between the white-sand beaches of Fort Myers and Sarasota's tropical island communities in southwest Florida. It will become Allegiant's fifth nonstop destination from Cedar Rapids, joining Las Vegas, Orlando Sanford, Phoenix-Mesa and St. Petersburg/Tampa.

Julie Hender of Destinations Unlimited in Cedar Rapids said direct flights to Punta Gorda should appeal to Eastern Iowans.

"Fort Myers is really big for people with winter homes in southwest Florida," Hender said. "If they can fly directly from Cedar Rapids to Punta Gorda, they can have someone pick them up at the airport.

"It will be much more convenient to get to Fort Myers, Naples, Bonita Springs and even down to Marco Island. Having an inexpensive nonstop service in the winter months will be very popular."

Airport Director Tim Bradshaw said there is a "huge connection" between residents of Eastern



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An Allegiant Air flight leaves The Eastern Iowa Airport for Mesa, Ariz., on Dec. 27, 2009. (Mike Hlas/The Gazette)

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Iowa and southwest Florida.

“A lot of them have second homes or they vacation in southwest Florida,” Bradshaw said. “We’re just thrilled to have another Florida destination for them.”

Bradshaw said the airport was able to secure a grant from the Iowa Department of Transportation to help attract the new Allegiant service to Punta Gorda. IDOT will reimburse the airport for 40 percent of the cost of marketing the new service up to a maximum of \$50,000.

Bradshaw said the Air Service Enhancement funding under Iowa Air Service Development Program was previously used to help market Frontier Airlines flights from Cedar Rapids to Denver, Colo. The latest Air Service Enhancement grant was contingent on Allegiant approving new service from Cedar Rapids.



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