



SAM RICHE / The Star

SALES TAKE OFF: Seth Brown, a Branson AirExpress team leader, talks with Indianapolis International Airport Chief Financial Officer Marsha Stone about the airline's new routes. Brown said the just-announced flights to the Missouri city went on sale immediately after Wednesday's announcement.

Airline strikes right chord

Branson AirExpress says by fall it will begin nonstops from Indy to the country music vacation spot

By **Bruce C. Smith**

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By September, a new airline will land at Indianapolis International Airport, offering non-stop flights to Branson, Mo., a family-friendly entertainment city in the Ozarks that is a popular driving destination for Hoosiers.

Officials of the Indianapolis Airport Authority and the Branson Airport announced plans Wednesday to add Indianapolis to the list of cities with direct service to the resort city, which drew 7.8 million visitors last year. Chicago's Midway Airport also will join the list in the fall.

"Branson Airport's research indicates an average of 200 people a day from the Indianapolis area are making an eight-hour drive to Branson," said Chris Matney, air service director at the Indianapolis airport. "Their travel time will be reduced to about one hour and 29 minutes by air."

Branson AirExpress, operating as a scheduled public charter service, will offer nonstop flights between Indianapolis and Branson four days a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, beginning Sept. 10.

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Branson Convention and Visitors Bureau

HIGH LIFE: The Silver Dollar City roller coaster loops above Branson, Mo., in the Ozark Mountains.

BRANSON

- » **WHAT:** Begins in September and will offer direct flights to Branson, Mo., from Indianapolis International Airport.
- » **OWNERSHIP:** Investors in the year-old Branson Airport also own Fly Branson Travel Services, the marketing partner of Branson AirExpress, which then contracted with Express Jet for planes and crews.
- » **AIRCRAFT:** Embraer 50-seat ERJ-145 turbine jets.
- » **ROUTE:** Four weekly direct flights will be Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.
- » **FARE:** \$59 introductory price to Branson, plus \$11.95 convenience fee for ticketing and \$15 for the first checked bag.

Airline

» Carrier will use a Frontier Airlines gate in Concourse B.

From A12

The one-way introductory fare will be \$59 plus baggage and other fees.

At the Indianapolis terminal, Branson AirExpress will use the ticket counter, ground support and a gate of Frontier Airlines in Concourse B.

The direct flights into Branson are geared toward music fans and vacationers to the region's country music halls, golf courses, restaurants and antique shops.

Seth Brown of Branson AirExpress said the direct flights also may appeal to some business travelers. They will be within a 40-minute drive of Springfield, Mo. Or they could connect to other cities in the AirExpress network, including Houston and Austin, Texas.

Travelers through the Col. H. Weir Cook Terminal building at Indianapolis on Wednesday liked the sound of \$59 direct flights to Branson.

"We like country music, and I can see us getting on a plane to Branson," said Art Nalker, 63, Washington, Ind.

The former St. Louis resident said "that is a beautiful area in the Ozarks. And the \$59 cost of a ticket . . . you can't drive it for that price."

In a written statement, Don Welsh, president of the Indianapolis Convention & Visitors Association, said the direct flights could bring people to Indianapolis, too. "Increasing air service in Indianapolis is a crucial tool in driving new business and attracting leisure visitors to the city."

Seth Brown of Branson AirExpress said tickets went on sale immediately after the announcement of service Wednesday.

Branson AirExpress is a relative upstart in the airline industry but with a growing network of destinations that connect with Branson.

In effect, the purpose of the service is to make convenient direct connections to cities more than a few hundred miles from Branson and ferry tourists to the relatively remote city's attractions.

Airport industry experts think the new Branson Airport is one of a very few, perhaps the only, privately built and owned airport offering commercial air service. It was built in the past eight years with about \$155 million of private investment.

POPULAR TRIPS

According to AAA, Branson, Mo., is a popular driving destination for Hoosier vacationers.

Here are the top driving destinations from Indiana:

1. Multiple Indiana locations, including Brown County and Santa Claus.
2. Michigan
3. Illinois
4. Ohio
5. Kentucky
6. Wisconsin
7. Missouri (including Branson)
8. Tennessee

Source: AAA

The airport operation then signed several airlines to partner in providing direct service, including AirTran and Frontier Airlines, which is owned by Indianapolis-based Republic Airways Holdings. Frontier has several flights each week from Branson but no direct connections with Indianapolis.

★ Call Star reporter Bruce C. Smith at (317) 444-6081.