AIR NEW ZEALAND MAKES INAUGURAL VOYAGE TO VIETNAM

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Lemongrass chicken and black pepper beef were on the menu for passengers lucky enough to grab a seat on Air New Zealand airline's inaugural flight to Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam.

The 11-hour flight touched down on Sunday morning (NZT), with dignitaries including Economic Development Minister Steven Joyce and Vietnamese Ambassador to New Zealand Viet Dung Nguyen greeted by a kapa haka group upon disembarking.

Air New Zealand said the addition of a new destination showed the airline was in "strong growth mode" and confident about launching more new routes.

A kapa haka group greeted Economic Development Minister Steven Joyce and other dignitaries when Air

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A kapa haka group greeted Economic Development Minister Steven Joyce and other dignitaries when Air New Zealand's first flight to Ho Chi Minh City touched down.

Air New Zealand chief sales and commercial officer Cam Wallace, who was on the flight, said it was "quite a significant day" for the company as it grew its market in the Pacific Rim.

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"We see tremendous economic opportunities in this part of the world."

Air New Zealand's first flight to Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam is part of efforts to grow in the Pacific Rim, the

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Sam Sachdeva

Air New Zealand's first flight to Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam is part of efforts to grow in the Pacific Rim, the airline says.

Wallace said Vietnam was an attractive destination for Kiwi travellers, as it offered a mixture of beaches, history and culture.

Joyce said the launch of the flight was important for New Zealand's relationship with South East Asia, as Vietnam had one of the world's fastest growing economies and was open to trade, having joined the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement.

The international education sector could benefit from closer links with Vietnam, which had 91 million people with an average age of 24, while New Zealand exporters could also do well, he said.

The launch of the Ho Chi Minh City flight comes after Air New Zealand launched new routes to

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Houston, Buenos Aires and Beijing last year, while it will start up a direct link with Manila in the Philippines from December.

Wallace said the airline was in "strong growth mode" and confident about expanding further.

"We're still seeing tremendous opportunities in the Pacific Rim, and we're a lot more confident of our ability to execute in new markets than we have been."

The Ho Chi Minh City flights would initially operate seasonally, flying three times a week until the end of October, as the airline tested market demand in peak season to see whether it should be extended.

Stuff flew to Ho Chi Minh City courtesy of Air New Zealand.

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