

Strong demand on United States routes has led Air New Zealand to add flights from next year and convinced Hawaiian Airlines to use a bigger plane, even before it has started up its services.

One travel agent says the increasing competition across the Pacific and high New Zealand dollar were resulting in some great deals across the Pacific.

Air New Zealand announced yesterday that it will add approximately 5000 return seats a month to North America as it further increases capacity to San Francisco, Vancouver and Los Angeles from next April. The airline says a further boost in capacity is likely.

It will operate daily return flights on the Auckland-San Francisco route, which has mainly run five times a week. Auckland to Los Angeles will also increase, with twice-daily flights from April, compared with 12 flights a week at the same time this year.

The airline will continue to operate a third Los Angeles flight one day a week in peak demand periods around the July and October school holidays.

It said the additional capacity would replace more than 75 per cent of the seats lost from the California market this year following the exit of Qantas in May from the Auckland-Los Angeles route.

Capacity on the Auckland to Vancouver route will be boosted with an extra service to three return services a week in off-peak periods and five times a week over peak demand times from mid-December to the end of February.

Hawaiian Airlines said strong demand from New Zealand travellers had convinced it to launch new Auckland-Honolulu flights with its flagship Airbus A330-200 aircraft, instead of the smaller Boeing 767-300ERs it was planning to use.

The new flights, which will operate three times weekly from March 14 next year, have attracted strong bookings to both Hawaii and the US mainland.

Hawaiian's newest and largest aircraft type, the Airbus A330, seats 294 passengers in a two-class cabin - 30 more passengers than the Boeing 767.

Hawaiian will also fly on to 11 US mainland cities - Los Angeles, San Francisco, Las Vegas, Seattle, Portland, Sacramento, San Jose, Oakland, San Diego and Phoenix.

The airline's executive vice-president and chief commercial officer said Hawaiian "was delighted" sales justified upgrading the jet six months before services were to begin.

Flight Centre's executive general manager, Mike Friend, said the response to Hawaiian's full service offering had been strong and a near-new plane was "very compelling".

"New Zealanders have really embraced Hawaiian's simple pricing structure. You get meals, drinks and two 32kg bags all included."

House of Travel commercial director Brent Thomas said he was not surprised at Hawaiian's move given the huge demand to get to the islands, which had been underserved.

"We'd expect over time that they'll increase their frequency ..."

Air New Zealand would be mindful of Hawaiian's connections to the US mainland, he said.

"It's great for the consumer when you've got competition because it brings great pricing and also brings availability."

Deputy chief joins list of high profile departures

Air New Zealand's deputy chief executive Norm Thompson will leave the airline next year after almost 45 years, the fourth high profile departure announced this year.

He joined Air NZ in 1968 as a finance clerk and has worked his way through the airline to hold a variety of management positions over the past two decades, including being head of its short haul airlines, marketing and network sales, The Americas and New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.

His departure - on June 30 next year - will follow the long-signalled departure of CEO Rob Fyfe, human resources and technical operations head Vanessa Stoddart and operations general manager Glen Sowry.

In a note to staff yesterday, Fyfe described Thompson, 62, as "a world-class senior executive" who had been critical to shaping the airline.

Thompson is also the chairman of the Tourism Industry Association.

Air NZ chairman John Palmer is also in his final term and relative newcomer Christopher Luxon takes over as chief executive in January.