

AVIATION

Descending to Don Mueang: Scoot's B777-200 set to start operating for NokScoot on Sept 1.

NokScoot to speed up long-haul plan

BOONSONG KOSITCHOTETHANA

NokScoot looks set to bring forward its plan to launch long-haul, low-cost flights from Bangkok.

The joint venture between Thai budget carrier Nok Air and Singapore's low-cost carrier Scoot is aiming to jump-start the new carrier by using a Thai airline licence held by Pete Air, which has not flown.

Using Pete Air's licence would allow NokScoot to avoid the lengthy process of obtaining an air operator's certificate for using an aircraft for commercial purposes from the Department of Civil Aviation.

NokScoot executives told Thai authorities that it would inaugurate flights from Bangkok's Don Mueang airport to Japan on Sept 1 without naming the specific city, which is widely understood by the industry as being Narita, a main gateway to the Land of the Rising Sun.

The launch date is two months ahead of the earlier target, November, as it does not want to trail behind Thai AirAsia X (TAAX), part of Asia's largest budget carrier group AirAsia, which has already has a head start in opening up the long-haul, low-cost segment in Thailand.

NokScoot's new launch date coincides with TAAX's announced Sept 1 start-up of scheduled non-stop flights from its Don Mueang base to Narita and Osaka, which follows on the heels of the carrier's maiden direct flight to South Korea's Incheon airport on June 17.

NokScoot will basically be fighting for the same markets — traffic between

Thailand and East Asia including Japan, South Korea and northern China.

NokScoot is taking steps to meet the targeted Sept 1 launch. On Friday, it flew the Boeing 777-200 wide-body aircraft sourced from Scoot's fleet for two commercial charter flights from Don Mueang to Chiang Mai as part of a warm-up to test readiness.

The airline, owned 49% by Scoot Pte and 51% by SET-listed Nok Air and four of its senior executives, will soon send the aircraft overseas for a retrofit to increase seating density to 415 from 323, according to industry sources.

A new paint job, featuring the blended liveries of bird-themed Nok Air and Scoot, will also be carried out before it returns to Don Mueang for the commercial service start-up.

NokScoot will have only one aircraft operating this year, while a second aircraft of similar type is expected in the early part of next year.

NokScoot plans to add two B777-200 jets annually to its fleet and all the aircraft will be leased from Singapore Airlines.

Meanwhile, Scoot has resolved to migrate its Thai base from Suvarnabhumi airport to Don Mueang, also on Sept 1.

Scoot operates a daily Singapore-Bangkok flight using wide-body aircraft. Its base shift will consolidate its own operation with its Thai partner at Don Mueang, Nok Air's hub.

NokScoot was allocated check-in row 7 at Don Mueang by Airports of Thailand Plc and will share some of Nok Air's check-in space in rows 5 and 6.