

CONNECTION STRATEGY

Nok Air will begin offering what it claims to be the first free in-flight broadband connectivity in Asia for passengers. **B3**



Nok Air chief executive Patee Sarasin tests the speed of broadband internet service during a trial run on a commercial flight from Bangkok to Phuket.

Nok Air introduces free broadband gimmick

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Nok Air will begin offering what it claims to be the first free in-flight broadband connectivity in Asia for passengers.

The service is available on only one of its 16 existing B737-800 jets on a trial basis, as the airline tries to differentiate itself from rival carriers.

It intends to use the complimentary connectivity as a stepping stone to grow other revenue-generation avenues.

"I have something up my sleeve, but I can't give you the details now because our competitors could find out," said Nok Air chief executive Patee Sarasin.

The airline plans to equip six of its jetliners with the satellite-based WiFi over the

next 18 months.

The service is a collaboration with Thaicom Plc, the SET-listed satellite communications provider, and Global Eagle Entertainment Inc, a US-based provider of satellite-based in-flight WiFi and device-based entertainment.

Nok Air said WiFi service on its Nok Busarakam aircraft was expected to start next month.

Thaicom chief executive Suphaje Suthumpun said in-flight broadband service was an emerging trend as people want to stay connected wherever they are. Over the next decade, some 13,000 commercial aircraft worldwide will be internet-enabled, with 3,000 in Asia, she said.

There are 3,300 aeroplanes equipped with internet services now, with 3,000 in the US, about 200 in Europe and 80 in Asia.

She said about 1,000 of these jets were equipped with high-speed broadband service.

Meanwhile, Thai AirAsia (TAA) is ramping up connectivity from its Chiang Mai base with a non-stop link to Surat Thani.

The no-frills carrier will begin a daily service on Nov 1 to Surat Thani, its seventh route from the northern capital. It already operates direct flights from Chiang Mai to Phuket, Hat Yai, Krabi, Hangzhou, Hong Kong and Macau.

TAA will be the first airline to operate this route as it expands its flights outside of Bangkok.

Chief executive Tassapon Bijleveld said the entry of the airline's 40th A320 jet into service earlier this month allowed it to diversify routes. The new service aims to serve travel demand to Koh Samui, and the airline will offer a transfer via car and ferry to the island from Surat Thani airport starting from 990 baht one-way.

The service is intended to lure Thai travellers as well as visitors from China and Europe who appreciate convenient and cost-effective travel, said Mr Tassapon.

For the Chiang Mai-Surat Thani flight, TAA is introducing the route with a promotional fare of 590 baht per trip, with booking open online from now until Oct 5 for travel between Nov 1 and Oct 24 next year.