

FLYING THE COOP

Nok Air is dropping Nok Mini as a sub-brand in a shift of the budget airline's branding strategy. **B6**

AVIATION

Nok Mini flies the coop

Thai AirAsia adds Sakon Nakhon to roster

BOONSONG KOSITCHOTETHANA

Nok Air has opted to terminate Nok Mini, a sub-brand used by its now-defunct associate airline, Siam General Aviation (SGA), to pursue a single-brand strategy.

The SET-listed budget airline will not carry the name Nok Mini over to its rebuild of commuter services featuring six Canadian-made Bombardier Q400 NextGen turboprops.

"We don't need to use the Nok Mini brand any more," chief executive Patee Sarasin said. "We want to keep it as a single brand."

Until March 30, SGA operated eight interprovincial routes as Nok Mini, a trade name granted by Nok Air in 2009 with no equity participation.

Dropping the sub-brand represents a shift of the airline's branding strategy, which until

recently envisaged the continued usage of Nok Mini for secondary routes to differentiate it from Nok Air's trunk services on Boeing 787-800 jets.

The emergence of NokScoot, a joint venture set up by Nok Air and Singaporean budget carrier Scoot to operate a new long-haul discount airline out of Bangkok's Don Mueang airport, is another factor influencing its multibrand approach.

In late August, Nok Air took delivery of the first Q400 NextGen turboprop aeroplane painted with the airline's familiar bird-themed livery and its name.

The airline's second Q400, with 86 seats, is expected to be delivered this week to consolidate its secondary route network, which has seen a vacuum following its break with SGA's six Saab 340B turboprops.

The Q400s will be used for both domestic and international routes.

Nok Air is looking at new destinations in Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia with airports not serviceable by jets but accessible to the Q400 turboprop, said executives.

The airline is expected to have a fleet of four Q400s by year-end, with two more aeroplanes joining next year.

The Q400s replace two ageing ATR-72 turboprops it leased from Thai Airways International.

In other news, Thai AirAsia (TAA) on Wednesday commenced its latest route, Bangkok's Don Mueang airport to the north-eastern province of Sakon Nakhon, and announced an average load factor of 85% for the city pair through year-end.

Santisuk Klongchaiya, TAA director for commercial aviation, said the strong early bookings were indicative of the country's tourism sector returning to vibrancy.

The double daily services offered by the low-cost carrier have proven popular with Thai travellers, who make up 95% of TAA's tickets sold on the route, he said.

Sakon Nakhon is the 15th domestic destination served by TAA.

NOK shares closed yesterday on the SET at 15.10 baht, down 40 satang, in trade worth 58.1 million baht.