

Nok targets China after Hefei launch

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Nok Air has quietly made inroads into China by descending on the eastern city of Hefei as it puts the finishing touches on a bigger plan to penetrate the huge country.

The SET-listed budget carrier last week began offering four flights a week from its Don Mueang airport hub to Hefei Xinqiao airport in Anhui province, chief executive Patee Sarasin said yesterday.

He said the airline would soon finalise a strategic plan to cover southern China, with three or four cities including Nanjing and Chengdu on the radar screen.

Nok also plans to launch service to Vietnam this year.

"Thailand is a favourite destination among Chinese, so China is a very important market," Mr Patee said.

Local industry officials have categorised Nok's Hefei flights as a charter service since they are available only until March 25, but Mr Patee insists it is a scheduled service.

Nok's Chinese operation will cater mainly to Chinese tourists on package tours to Thailand.

Its Chinese strategy appears to target destinations within four hours of Bangkok for its fleet of Boeing 737-800s, each with 189 seats.

In 2012, Nok operated a series of charter flights for tour groups flying from Nanjing to Bangkok.

Its international service until recently

covered only Myanmar with a Bangkok-Yangon flight.

Over the past seven years, Nok has essentially been a domestic flight operator after its foray into international services nearly pushed the airline into bankruptcy.

Mr Patee said Nok was running out of Thai cities to serve, as it had already covered all destinations with sufficient demand.

Meanwhile, Bombardier Inc, the Canadian maker of the Q400 aeroplane, will

tomorrow begin retraining all Nok's cabin attendants, flight crew, technicians and ground service personnel on how to handle the cabin door of the turboprop.

The move follows last Wednesday's incident in Nan province when a rear cabin door could not be securely closed before take-off, stranding passengers, mostly VIPs, at Nan airport for more than three hours.

Frank Baistrocchi, Bombardier's regional vice-president for sales, yesterday said the problem was related to the sequence staff need to follow to shut the door.

There is nothing wrong with the door and no adjustment is required, he insisted, adding that this problem was not uncommon with new Q400 operators.

Bombardier has sold 540 Q400s globally, and it is a reliable aircraft, Mr Baistrocchi said.

NOK shares closed yesterday on the SET at 14.40 baht, up 10 satang, in trade worth 22.6 million baht.



Patee: Thai market saturated