

AVIATION

Nok Air preps more routes

DUSIDA WORRACHADDEJCHAI

Nok Air is planning to operate more inter-provincial routes, starting with Nakhon Ratchasima-Chiang Mai, as well as resume international flights to Vietnam by mid-2022.

Nok Air chief executive Wutthiphum Jurangkool said the airline is studying opportunities for cross-regional flights, particularly at the abandoned Nakhon Ratchasima airport and the new Betong airport in southern Yala province, to facilitate travel and create more economic activities.

Without air transport, people have to spend five hours travelling from Hat Yai to Betong by road.

People from the provinces without direct flights to their destination also have to wait for 2-3 hours for transit flights at Don Mueang airport.

The Nakhon Ratchasima-Chiang Mai route may initially start with 2-3

flights per week, with tickets priced at less than 2,000 baht, he said.

The airline is also planning a route from Nakhon Ratchasima to Phuket and Hat Yai based on seasonal demand, as well as a connection between Hat Yai with Betong.

Mr Wutthiphum said most airlines faced losses from operations at Nakhon Ratchasima airport because the aircraft they used were too big based on average passenger demand of 70-80 people per flight.

“Nok Air will use Q400 jets, which have an 86-seat capacity, but we have to receive approval from the Transport Ministry to bring in six new aircraft,” he said.

The airline submitted letters to related parties, such as the governor of Nakhon Ratchasima and the Department of Airports, to consider waiving or subsidising costs, especially the jet fuel tax, air traffic control fees and the airport tax, which add up

to more than 10% of costs.

Mr Wutthiphum said if there is no support from the government or state agencies, the plan to start new routes around June must be postponed.

He said even though the country is experiencing high daily Covid-19 infections, business travellers still depend on airlines, accounting for 60% of overall passengers.

At present, Nok Air operates 62 daily flights with a 75% load factor, compared with 40-50 flights per day last month.

The airline’s frequency will increase to 80-100 flights in April, particularly during the Songkran holiday, said Mr Wutthiphum.

Nok Air upgraded its targets for this year thanks to further relaxations of border restrictions within Southeast Asia.

He said Thailand might see an influx of international travellers in the second half of the year if the country

can fully reopen with fewer restrictions and testing requirements.

Nok Air plans to resume its first international route to Ho Chi Minh City in mid-2022, and is in discussions with Vietnamese travel agencies to drive demand to Thailand.

Other destinations include Osaka in Japan, as well as Guwahati or other major cities in India, such as New Delhi, Hyderabad and Varanasi.

The airline is waiting for the Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand to issue the rights to operate flights to India after permission expired during the pandemic.

Nok Air carried 1.5 million passengers last year.



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