

INTERVIEW

THAI's new route seen as a gateway from East Europe

JINTANA PANYAARVUDH
THE NATION

THAI Airways International (THAI) hopes its newly launched direct flight to and from Vienna will provide a gateway from Eastern Europe to Asia, CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) and Australia, according to Chonnakarn Akrapreedee, THAI general manager, Austria and Eastern Europe.

Due to Bangkok's central location in Southeast Asia, business and leisure passengers will be able to conveniently connect flights to various destinations throughout Asia, CLMV and Australia on flights operated by THAI and other airlines in its network, Chonnakarn said in a group interview last week.

Passengers in Asia would find it convenient to access Central and Eastern Europe via the new flight, she said.

"We saw the potential of Austria as the gateway to Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Croatia, where we can exchange tourism, trade and investment," Chonnakarn said.

THAI aims for 77 per cent occupancy rate on a capacity of 5,500 seats per month on the new route, she said.

She also expects the new route to contribute five per cent of total revenue in Europe, but declined to elaborate on the number.

Since the inaugural flight on November 16, inbound bookings were above target and bookings for December-January were over 80 per cent, she said.

"Since the launch, the market has been so excited about our product. 'Touches of Thai' are our advantage that differentiate us from other airlines," she said, referring to the company's promotional slogan.

She said that THAI also stresses the reputation of its brand and the fact that the flight is nonstop. She said an average of 100,000 Austrians came to Thailand each year, but that number was growing. Tourism Authority of Thailand data has shown that that number was already exceeded in October this year, according to Chonnakarn.

Previously, passengers flew from Bangkok to cities in Austria by transiting in Frankfurt or Munich, and total passenger numbers were only in five digits per year.

EVA Air and Austrian Airlines are THAI's competitors on this new route but THAI has more advantage as the airline has a route network to go "beyond Bangkok" while its rivals' destination ends in Bangkok.

However, she said since the launch most inbound passengers had flown THAI from Vienna with the purpose of visiting Bangkok, she said.

"But our marketing policy is trying to tell them that we are not just for Thailand destinations, but we are the gateway to fly further to Asia, CLMV or Australia," she said.

From this point, she said THAI also aimed to get 20 per cent of "network" passengers who have connecting flights in routes operated by THAI and its airlines network.



Chonnakarn Akrapreedee, THAI general manager, Austria and Eastern Europe.

Majority are leisure tourists

She said 70-80 per cent of passengers are leisure tourists. But as Vienna houses the headquarters of more than 50 international organisations, including offices of the United Nations, United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC), THAI hopes there is potential to grow business traffic, she said.

There are around 20,000 officials working at those organisations who travel all the time for business and vocational trips.

"They are people who travel to developing countries in CLMV, where we have a route network as well," she said.

For Chonnakarn, who was formerly general manager for Southern Japan and Shanghai, the challenge in managing the new route is the commitment given by the firm to target 77 per cent of passengers from the total seat offering.

She said since passenger demand was seasonal, the airline needed to fill up the cabin people other than leisure travellers.

Apart from 70-80 per cent of passengers travelling for leisure, she aims for 15 per cent of corporate business traffic and 5 per cent from the ethnic market, she said.

"We are the new [airline to offer the route] so we need

to be proactive in order to acquire more passengers by offering new products. For example, we have designed an additional cultural destination to Siem Reap where our rival Austrian Airlines does not provide the service," she said.

Moreover, she hopes to develop the frequency of the new route. "If the market becomes mature, we want to increase the frequency of flights from four to five a week or even daily," she said.

She said she would review the response from the market after three months.

THAI operates four roundtrip flights per week from Bangkok-Vienna on Monday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday using Boeing 777-300ER aircraft that are equipped with 348 seats, consisting of 42 seats in business class with fully flat beds that recline 180 degrees and 306 seats in economy class.

The schedule for flights to and from Vienna, taking about 10 hours, are as follows: TG936 Bangkok-Vienna, departs 1.30am and arrives at 7am (local time). TG937 Vienna-Bangkok, departs 1.30pm and arrives next day at 5.20am local time. In a long-term plan, THAI is considering offering premium economy class on some long haul flights to Europe, Chonnakarn said.

"It is a trend in Europe that people want to try something that is affordable," she said, adding that while premium economy was not as good as business class, it offered more legroom.

Currently, THAI flies to 13 destinations in 11 countries in Europe: Copenhagen, Oslo, Brussels, Paris, Frankfurt, Munich, Zurich, Stockholm, London, Rome, Milan, Moscow and Vienna.