

Brussels to Link Moscow and Africa

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Waffle munchers, beer enthusiasts and the occasional diplomatic mission to or from the European Union or NATO will be pleased to hear that connections between Brussels and Moscow are about to become more frequent.

Brussels Airlines will introduce twice-daily flights between the European and Russian capitals from April in a bid to increase transit traffic to Europe and muscle in on a growing flow of travelers between Russia and Africa, executives said Wednesday.

"It took three years of lobbying to get the agreement through," Frederic Dechamps, vice president for European sales, told The Moscow Times, referring to the bilateral aviation treaty that made the expansion possible.

The company, which currently flies 10 flights weekly between the Belgian and Russian capitals, says it has seen passenger numbers leap more than 20 percent to 58,022 passengers in January to October this year, up from 44,270 in the same period of 2010.

The only direct competitor on the Brussels-to Moscow route is Aeroflot, which flies daily out of Sheremetyevo.

"With the higher frequency of flights, passengers making connecting flights will no longer have to wait a night in Brussels and can avoid the attendant need for a Belgian transit visa — that makes transit much more attractive," Dechamps said.

About 40 percent of Russian passengers on flights to Brussels connect to other destinations, mostly in Europe. But the airline also hopes to seize 10 percent of the small but growing flow of traffic between Russia and Africa by the end of next year, said Markhu Ahteela, regional manager for the Nordic countries and Russia.

Russian travel agents sell about 10,000 tickets for African destinations annually. Brussels Airlines, which inherited an extensive African network from now-defunct Belgian national carrier Sabina, currently holds about 2 percent of that market, Ahteela said.

About 35 percent of Russian-bought tickets are for Nairobi. "Kenya basically means tourism," Ahteela told The Moscow Times. "But if you look at Luanda in Angola or Entebbe in Uganda, you have people visiting friends and family as well as business travelers. That's only going to grow as Russian oil and gas and mining businesses invest there."

The airline, which is part of the Lufthansa group and 45 percent owned by the German carrier, was caught in an "uncomfortable place" by the financial crisis in Europe and recent political instability in Africa, its two main markets, Dechamps said.

Aeroflot is considering placing an order for 30 Airbus A-320 aircraft with a catalog price of \$2.25 billion. No contract price has yet been agreed, Vedomosti reported Wednesday.

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