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Virgin Airlines Plans to Fly to Russia

By The Moscow Times

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Virgin Atlanic planes, seen here at London's Heathrow airport, could touch down on Moscow tarmacs as soon as next year.

Billionaire Richard Branson's Virgin Atlantic airlines, long considering entering the Russian market, has decided to begin operating daily flights between London's Heathrow Airport and Moscow starting next year.

British Airways was the lone British company to service Moscow until 2006, when British Midland International joined the fray. But after a scheduled merger of the two companies takes place, new openings for operating flights will become available.

Virgin Atlantic chief Steve Ridgeway said the airline hopes to take all 12 of the slots opening between Moscow and London, the Guardian reported.

"Linking these two cities will be an important part of our strategy to run short-haul flights into Heathrow thus feeding our long-haul network. It will also radically improve competition on the route," Ridgeway said.

Traffic between the cities has tripled in recent years, and the company hopes to capitalize on the booming market.

Ridgeway said the move is also a way to pump up competition at Heathrow.

"Our core flying has always been across the Atlantic, but we have been clear that we will also continue to grow our routes to emerging markets if given the slots at London Heathrow. Moscow would be our third BRIC country, and we think it is imperative for British trade that we are operating in these economies," he said.

Experts quoted by Vedomosti said the move was positive but is unlikely to affect prices.

"The arrival of Virgin is good news for passengers flying from Moscow to the Western hemisphere. ... Virgin is one of the best carriers between Europe and the U.S. and in London it has a big hub," Boris Rybak, general director of transportation media relations company Infomost, told the daily. "But from the point of view of pricing policies, it's unlikely anything will change."

Transaero spokesman Sergei Bykhal told Vedomosti that the company may become a parter of Virgin, though it will finish the travel season operating flights with partner bmi.

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