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Less Booze, More Comfort For Travelers Using New Vnukovo Terminal

By Roland Oliphant

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Vnukovo's new Terminal A consists of polished marble, corrugated metal and vast light-giving glass walls held aloft by a cobweb of steel girders. **Vladimir Filonov**

VNUKOVO, Moscow Region — A complete ban on alcohol sales at airports and on board aircraft could make air travel more expensive, a Moscow airport executive said Wednesday.

Vnukovo Airport chairman Vitaly Vantsev said at a news conference Friday that prohibitionist policies being floated in response to a spate of air-rage incidents could eat into airport and airlines profits, forcing them to raise ticket prices to compensate.

"There are two questions here, social and commercial," Vantsev said. "On the social side, 80 percent of passengers drink because flying is pretty stressful, and why shouldn't they have a glass of champagne? But they are not hooligans and should not be classified as such."

"On the commercial side, for the past 10 years the government has told us the cost of air travel

must fall, and it is happening," he said. "But sales of duty-free items are a big part of income for both airports and airlines."

"[Retailers] come to us and ask for rate reductions," he said. "These costs, we will certainly pass on to rates and charges. It will automatically increase the cost of tickets."

National anti-tobacco legislation has already made Russia one of the first countries in the world to ban tobacco sales at duty-free stores, Vantsev said.

In-flight chaos came to the forefront last week when an Aeroflot flight bound for Phuket, Thailand, had to make an emergency landing in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, after a fight broke out among passengers.

Earlier this month, several State Duma deputies proposed a ban on alcohol consumption on board as well as a ban on alcohol sales at duty-free stores to combat such incidents.

Transaero CEO Olga Pleshakova said she would in principle welcome limitations on in-flight drinking.

"We're not against spirits, but we're against bringing large quantities of spirits on board," she said.

Pleshakova said her airline was looking at a solution by which customers would receive their duty-free purchases once they land at their destination, a system she said already operates in the United States.

"Six years ago, we initiated a campaign against on-board hooliganism," she said. "We united other airlines in this, and such incidents are now much rarer than they used to be."

Pleshakova and Vantsev were speaking at a news conference to mark the first year of a cooperation agreement between the newly renovated Vnukovo Airport and Transaero, Russia's largest privately owned airline.

Both used the occasion to declare ambitious plans to build the airport into a competitor to rival privately owned Domodedovo and Aeroflot's home base of Sheremetyevo.

Speaking at a joint news conference with Vnukovo managers, Pleshakova said Wednesday that her airline would seek to build the recently renovated airport into a "major transit hub."

Transaero, which signed a cooperation agreement with Vnukovo in February 2012, has already moved flights to destinations including Rome, London, Paris and Tel Aviv, Israel, to the airport.

This year, it intends to add North American destinations including New York and hopes to fly 19 routes from Vnukovo by year's end.

The airport is already a hub for UTair and has also attracted flights from Lufthansa and Virgin Atlantic, creating an opportunity turn it into a transit hub for flights between Russia, Central Asia and Europe, Vantsev said.

It has also been a profitable partnership.

"We're especially pleased with the partnership, not only because of the convenience for passengers, but also, of course, in terms of income," airport general director Vasily Alexandrov said at the news conference. "Transaero has brought us a lot of work, and more work obviously means more financial returns."

Vnukovo's renovation is long overdue. While Domodedovo and Sheremetyevo underwent expensive makeovers, Vnukovo stubbornly stuck to a cramped, chaotic Soviet-era terminal that made flying out of it an ordeal best forgotten.

The new Terminal A, a vast 270,000-square-meter atrium that officially opened on Dec. 18 in a lavish ceremony that included a concert by Placido Domingo in the Christ the Savior Cathedral, is meant to make the airport a real competitor.

From above, the hall's contours describe smooth, elliptical lines, like an expensive design studio's rendering of an alien spacecraft. Inside, it is all polished marble, corrugated metal and vast light-giving glass walls held aloft, as is the fashion in airport design these days, by a cobweb of steel girders.

It has a train station linking it to Moscow in the basement, a huge fountain at its center and swanky Winston-sponsored smoking lounges.

But the management believes its trump card is not contemporary architecture but convenience. Vnukovo is closer to Moscow than either Domodedovo or Sheremetyevo. It is 11 kilometers from the Moscow Ring Road, and the train ride to Kievsky Station takes 33 minutes.

In addition, the airport's location in the city's southwest puts it a few minutes closer to Europe.

But there are still kinks to smooth out. The terminal is not entirely finished and is only partially functional. The glass-paned roof in places leaks drops of meltwater onto passengers' heads. And the free Wi-Fi signal fades to nothingness as you make your way deeper inside the building.

Its vast halls, built to handle 30 million passengers a year, were almost eerily empty Wednesday, and the small trickle of travelers headed for UTair and Transaero flights around the country had as many seats in the waiting lounges as they could possibly desire.

Through the plate-glass walls, they could rest their eyes on the distant red tail fins of five Red Wings airliners parked a respectful distance from the terminal while their fate — the airline was stripped of a license to fly following a crash at Vnukovo in December — is decided.

Such tranquility is a rare luxury for air travelers. But it won't last if the airport realizes its dream of becoming as busy as Sheremetyevo and Domodedovo.

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