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New Heliport Gives Travelers Another Option to Get to the Airport and Beyond

By Alexander Panin

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The facility has landing pads, a pilot school and hangars for its own and visiting official and private choppers. **Vladimir Filonov**

MYAKININO, Moscow Region — The battle for freedom of movement escalated on Thursday with the opening of a heliport 700 meters outside the Moscow Ring Road that aims to ferry travelers to the city's airports and further destinations.

It was built by NDV real estate group and is operated by Aerosoyuz helicopter company, which owns the aircraft and provides the pilots.

Three passengers filling a small chopper would pay 15,600 rubles ($475) per person to fly 15 minutes from the helicopter facility to Sheremetyevo airport. The cost includes flight time, landing fee and cost of a transfer to the check-in counter.

The same service to Domodedovo airport, which is a 30-minute flight, would cost only 13,000

rubles per person, since that airport has lower landing fees.

But those wanting to make use of the service will still have to check Yandex.Maps for traffic jams on the way to the facility located just next to Novorizhskoe Shosse, and might want to look at the Kremlin website for any hints of President Vladimir Putin's plans — demonstration flights for journalists on Wednesday were delayed because the skies were temporarily closed due to Putin's need to fly somewhere.

Still, Aerosoyuz sees the helicopter's inherent flexibility as a key strength.

"The joy of the helicopter is that it can land almost anywhere provided the spot is relatively flat and clean of snow or mud," said Alexander Klimchuk, the head of Aerosoyuz.

That means that a destination does not necessarily have to be a pad inside an airport, but could be a point just outside the airport's territory where such a landing is possible. The passenger would then have to book a taxi to get from the field he selects to land in to the check out counter of his terminal. But he will have avoided the landing fee.

But Alexander Khrustalev, head of the board of NDV and himself a helicopter enthusiast, said that his company plans to rent space and prepare a landing pad near Sheremetyevo, as well as at some other destinations, where it is needed, and organize shuttle service from the helipad to airport's terminals.

When that happens, the air taxi service might become more affordable. But the new venture is designed to take passengers even further.

Companies or individuals can rent a chopper at the heliport and fly virtually anywhere in Central Russia and, if necessary, to and from Europe with only one day prior notice. The price for the service starts at 24,000 rubles per helicopter per hour. Client have to pay for the round trip.

A Robinson model chopper can take up to three passengers to Smolensk, for instance, in just 2 hours. And it can fly in 8 hours to Sochi. The helicopter can wait up to 5 hours for the passengers free of charge. Additional waiting costs half as much as the time spent in the air.

Although the facility now consists of a few metal buildings and inflatable hangers resembling a moon base, NDV has big plans for the helicopter center, and they go far beyond providing only air taxi services.

A flight school for training pilots is already functioning, and the heliport is also able to host any one of the approximately 2,000 privately owned choppers in the country, and those that belong to government agencies, including the Emergency Situations Ministry.

Eventually the facility will become a full-scale, one-of-a-kind heliport, a home to more than 200 rotor aircraft, which would make it the biggest port of its type in Europe.

"The helicopters will land on multi-level retractable landing pads," Khrustalev said. "Also, the plans are to build service infrastructure around the heliport, including a four-star hotel, restaurant, yachting club, leisure and business center and a helicopter salesroom."

Unnamed private investors are putting about $420 million into the total project.

NDV is planning to start building the service infrastructure on the territory of 3 hectares around the existing center next spring, with scheduled completion of the whole heliport by the end of 2016.

The demand for helicopter rides is there, chopper enthusiasts said. According to Klimchuk, Russia currently absorbs 17 percent of world's annual helicopter production. And Khrustalev expects 400 people to use the heliport's services on a daily basis when it becomes fully operational.

Now there are about a dozen companies in the Moscow region that offer helicopter rides. One other heliport, organized by Russian Helicopter Systems together with manufacturer Russian Helicopters, opened earlier this year on the rooftop of a building at the Crocus City complex just a few kilometers away from Heliport Moscow.

At the time of its opening it was also said to be the first of its kind. The price there, according to the site of the service called HeliExpress, is 25,000 rubles per person for a one-way flight to Vnukovo airport. Crocus City has the advantage that it has a metro station inside it.

Beyond the high price and limited passenger service infrastructure, helicopter travel has other inconveniences. Luggage space is limited. It is necessary to be able to make it to the heliport itself. And it is still possible for a flight to be delayed by an airborne high-ranking official.

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