

# Britain's EasyJet Cuts Flights to Russia Amid Aviation Downturn

By [Howard Amos](#)

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British budget airline EasyJet halved the number of flights it offers on its Moscow-London route Monday as international carriers scale back their Russian operations amid falling demand.

From March 30, EasyJet will offer only one daily flight from London to Moscow, leaving Gatwick Airport at 7:00 a.m., and one daily flight from Moscow to London, departing Domodedovo Airport at 1:35 p.m.

Passenger turnover on international flights to and from Russia has dropped by almost 20 percent this year compared to the same period last year, stricken by the ruble crisis and fraying international ties over the Ukraine crisis.

"EasyJet can confirm that from 26 Jan. it reduced its double daily London Gatwick to Moscow service to 11 services per week for the remainder of the winter schedule and then to a daily service for the summer season. ... This was in response to the reduction in demand to and

from Russia in recent months," EasyJet said in a statement Monday. The no-frills airline first announced its plans to reduce the service in January.

EasyJet has also cut its services between Moscow and Manchester in northern Britain. The service now runs just two days a week, compared with the four days previously offered.

Beating off competition from Richard Branson's Virgin Atlantic, EasyJet acquired the Moscow-London route in 2012, becoming the first major budget carrier to link Moscow with the West. It began operating the flights with great fanfare and promises to grow Moscow's popularity as a tourist destination. As the only budget carrier linking Moscow with London, it was a boon to cost-conscious British expats and Russian tourists.

Other international carriers that have reduced their flights to Russia reportedly include Hong Kong carrier Cathay Pacific, Air India, Thai Airways, Qatar Airways and United Arab Emirates airline Etihad. German budget airline Germanwings said it was canceling several flights to Moscow earlier this year.

The Federal Air Transportation Agency, or Rosaviatsia, said March 24 that Russian airlines were planning to ditch 71 international routes this year, the RBC news website reported.

"The main reason is the sharp devaluation of the ruble, which means that it has become twice as expensive for Russians to travel abroad," said Roman Gusarov, chief editor of Russian aviation news website avia.ru.

The Russian currency plunged to its lowest levels against the U.S. dollar since the 1990s in December and has fallen 43 percent against the U.S. dollar since the beginning of 2014.

Experts also said that fewer foreigners are traveling to Russia because of a reduction in economic activity between Russia and Europe following worsening ties between Moscow and the West over the Kremlin's support for separatist rebels in Ukraine.

Passenger turnover on international flights in and out of Russia has fallen 18.2 percent in January and February compared to the same period a year earlier, according to official data.

In January, 2.6 million people took flights into and out of Russia compared with 3.1 million in the same month in 2014, according to a February report by Russia's Association of Tour Operators.

Only four carriers — two British, two Russian — have licenses to operate the Moscow-London route. EasyJet is the only low-cost airline. The three others are British Airways, Russian national carrier Aeroflot and Russian private carrier Transaero.

A one-way flight to London from Moscow in economy class on April 20 costs 166.9 euros (\$180) with EasyJet, 65,665 rubles (\$1,135) with British Airways, 16,053 rubles (\$278) with Aeroflot and (\$209) with Transaero.

"When an airline reduces its routes it's likely that the price will rise," said Andrei Rozhkov, a transportation analyst at Metropol brokerage in Moscow.

"There is every likelihood that EasyJet will raise ticket prices on its Moscow-London route."

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