

# EasyJet Starts Flights to U.K. From Domodedovo

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With the inauguration of the first easyJet flights from Moscow to London on Tuesday, the fleet of aircraft adorned by orange winglets has opened the door for the lowest fares that Russians have ever seen to Britain, and already exceeded the booking expectations of Europe's fourth largest airline.

"We would be surprised if after the first year we do not break even," easyJet's chief executive, Carolyn McCall, said Tuesday at a news conference to mark what she called a "landmark route" between London's Gatwick Airport and Moscow's Domodedovo.

Perhaps it was a coincidence, but the low-cost carrier achieved another milestone the same day, when its shares were included for the first time in the group of top 100 British companies with the highest market capitalization on the London Stock Exchange.

The new routes are set to add to the firm's market value, with the Moscow-London flight leaving Domodedovo each day at 2:30 p.m., and starting April 15, there will be an additional flight departing at 9:40 p.m. Prices will start at \$99.99 for a one-way ticket, and easyJet expects that the annual passenger flow on the route will exceed 300,000.

Two-way flights for the same route in mid-May cost \$368 for Aeroflot and \$503 for British Airways.

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Domodedovo Airport already hosts two-thirds of all Moscow-London flights, while easyJet's entry into the market will boost total daily flights to London from three to five.

"The Russian authorities not long ago started calling for a reduction of airfares for Russian passengers," said Daniel Burkard, external and internal relations director at Domodedovo. "This new route really supports this goal and is a very important way to make air travel more affordable for the Russian public."

If the route is successful, easyJet might look into connecting Moscow with other parts of its network. Expansion to other locations in Russia or the former Soviet republics, however, is "not in the plans at all," McCall said.

The challenge for expanding service to Moscow will be in complying with bilateral agreements that place limitations on the number of flights each of the four carriers on the London-Moscow route can operate. EasyJet recently signed a commercial agreement with Transaero, which also has flights on that route, but McCall declined to give any details on the deal.

EasyJet is not planning to lobby for changes to the bilateral agreements but will work within the existing system, McCall said. However, the airline is working to make visa processes easier.

"There's plenty of issues with visas, and we're working with both governments to make the visa issue simpler. It's not going to be an easy fix," said Paul Simmons, easyJet's U.K. director.

For now, even visas don't seem to be a huge obstacle. Although easyJet only started selling tickets for the Moscow-London route in January and the Moscow-Manchester route in December, bookings have already surpassed expectations.

The interest is solid from the Russian as well as the British sides. McCall said that when the airline announced it would fly to Moscow, the Russian capital became one of the top five destinations that people in Britain want to visit. TripAdvisor, the world's largest online travel guide, has reported a 99 percent surge in popularity for Moscow hotels after the tickets went on sale.

The numbers might pick up more when easyJet rolls out a promotional campaign in Russia, where its advertising has so far has been minimal. One of the key goals would be to make sure that the airline's desired image is not lost in translation.

"Our brand is not completely understood in the Russian market yet," McCall said. "I heard someone describe us as a discounter, which we would not say that we are. We are a value brand."

Perhaps in order to better localize its image, easyJet has announced that it would sell Russian Standard vodka on all of its European flights. And though the company has a zero-tolerance policy toward unruly passengers, easyJet management says passengers won't have to fly sober.

"If someone enjoys a drink on the flight, that's absolutely fine with easyJet — as long as they're not a disruptive influence," McCall said.

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