Regent starts flight to Muscat, adds another Boeing to fleet

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Regent Airways will start flying to Muscat—the capital of Oman—on April 7, which will be the airline's first Middle Eastern destination.

The flight will initially operate on the Dhaka-Chittagong-Muscat route every week on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays, the carrier said in a statement.

Regent will use its recently acquired Boeing 737-800 aircraft, which arrived at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport from Indonesia on Thursday.

The airline has leased the aircraft from an American company for six years, and it is the fifth member of the airline's fleet, which has two other Boeings and two Dash aircraft.

The minimum fare for Dhaka-Muscat route, including taxes, has been fixed at Tk 20,565 for one-way and Tk 39,478 for a return ticket while the rates will be Tk 19,005 and Tk 39,244 for Chittagong-Muscat route.

The one-way Muscat-Dhaka minimum fare will be 50 Omani rial and return 130 rial whereas one-way Muscat-Chittagong fare will be 60 rial and return 135 rial, according to the statement.

Besides, each passenger will be allowed to carry 20 kilograms of luggage from Bangladesh for free and the amount will be 45 kgs from Oman to Bangladesh, the airline said.

Regent aims to be the flying partner of Bangladeshi expatriates worldwide and is trying to make air travel more comfortable and cheaper, said Mashruf Habib, managing director of the airline.

The new route has been launched following Regent's success in operations on international routes, particularly Malaysia and Singapore, he added.

More and more Bangladeshis are travelling to Oman, as the country's procedures are relatively less strict, he said.

REGENT AIRWAYS

The recently acquired Boeing 737-800 of Regent Airways is seen at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

Nigerian businesswoman: A cut above in macho world of diamonds

AFP, London

Nigerian Thelma West is a rare gem in the diamond world as a woman in a male-dominated sector with few Africans, despite the continent being the main source of the precious rocks.

The first in her family to work in diamonds, West is used to being an outsider, having been raised in a Jewish family in a country where Jews number fewer than 50,000 out of a population of around 180 million.

"I'm the only Nigerian Jewish woman in the trade, and I don't know of other African women in the business," the 32-year-old told AFP at her London-based business as she greeted customers with a broad smile and sparkling diamonds on her hands and wrists.

Discretion and security are essential, with the anonymous-looking building guarded by an encrypted intercom system and a reinforced door, all under the gaze of a bank of security cameras.

After attending the most prestigious international school in Lagos, West travelled to Britain aged 16 to finish her education.

"I wanted to become an engineer because at that time in Nigeria, you had to choose a solid career, such as doctor, lawyer, engineer," she told AFP.

But, as the saying goes, "Diamonds Are Forever" and the sparkle of the stones, which had captivated West since childhood, was an irresistible allure.

"My mum had loads of jewellery," said the daughter of a Guinness drinks company employee mother and a property developer and industrialist father. "We were always playing with her jewellery box and she would always clean her jewels, and I would help."

West headed for Antwerp, the world's diamond capital, aged 17 despite "not knowing anybody" in the Belgian city.

There, she enrolled at the internationally renowned Hoge Raad Voor Diamant school to hone her skills.

AFP

Nigerian-Jewish diamond cutter and dealer, Thelma West, arranges a selection of diamond encrusted rings in her office in London.

"Even though you go to school, most of your knowledge comes from working with diamonds day-to-day," she said.

After trying for six months in vain to secure an internship, she was eventually taken under the wing of an Orthodox Jew diamond dealer, who worked with her every evening after school for a year.

She was then recruited by one of the biggest diamond suppliers in Europe based in Spain.

"It was being sent in at the deep end," she recalled. "I was 19 and I was responsible for every single diamond the company had".

Teaming up with school friends from Lagos who had moved into investment banking, West set up her own business in London to trade the precious stone. Metal tongs in hand, West explained the secrets of some of her stock. "Diamonds have fire," said West.

"That stone is too flat but it's got a lot of life in it, it was cut about 100 years ago," she said, pointing to one tiny rock.

"This one cost just over £100,000 ($141,000, 126,000 euros), it's got a low colour but it has been cut perfectly so it reflects light in such an amazing way."

Fewer than 50 clients, 12 of whom are investors, have access to West's knowledge.

"I can find a diamond and call them and say 'we have to buy this diamond, trust me' and they follow me," she said.

Oil giant PetroChina pumps lowest profit since 1999

AFP, Shanghai

Chinese oil giant PetroChina has posted its lowest profit since 1999 with the company citing a struggling global economy and slump in international oil prices last year.

State-owned PetroChina's net profit tumbled 66.7 percent year-on-year to 35.65 billion yuan ($5.50 billion) in 2015, the company said in a statement filed to the Shanghai stock exchange late Wednesday. The profit figure was the weakest since 1999, according to Bloomberg News.

Annual revenue dropped 24.4 percent on the year to 1.73 trillion yuan, the statement said, as benchmark crude oil prices slumped by nearly half.

"In 2015, the global economic recovery slowed down, the downward pressure on China's economy continuously intensified, the overall supply in the oil and gas market was sufficient and the international oil prices kept dropping," the statement said. China's economy, the world's second largest, grew an annual 6.9 percent last year -- the lowest in a quarter of a century -- which dragged on the global recovery.

PetroChina's Shanghai-listed stock was down 1.41 percent on Thursday afternoon.

Japan looks to kick-start 'fintech' revolution

REUTERS, Tokyo

A laggard in embracing the 'fintech', or financial technology revolution, Japan is set to ease investment restrictions that could free up the flow of capital in an economy sitting on an estimated $9 trillion in individuals' cash deposits.

Strict regulation, easy access to credit due to rock-bottom interest rates, and weak demand for innovative financial services from a risk-averse population that still prefers cash to credit cards, have strangled fintech's advance in Japan.

Fintech ventures - usually start-ups leveraging technology from cloud data storage to smartphones to provide loans, insurance and payment services - raised $2.7 billion in China last year, and over $1.5 billion in India, according to CB Insights data. Ventures in the United States attracted investment of around $7.4 billion.

In comparison, investment in Japanese ventures reached only around $44 million in the first nine months of 2015.

Now, Japan's financial industry regulator hopes relaxed rules on investing in financial ventures, and a new system for regulating virtual currency exchanges will pass through parliament by May - a first step in kickstarting the fintech revolution in the world's third-biggest economy.

"The law changes aren't a goal, but a first step," Norio Sato, a senior official at the Financial Services Authority (FSA), told Reuters. "Fintech will have a big impact on financial services."

The changes, which will allow banks to buy stakes of up to 100 percent in non-finance-related firms, will free up Japan's three megabanks to enter into tie-ups with fintech ventures developing services including robotic investment advisory and blockchain, the decentralised ledger technology behind the bitcoin digital currency.

REUTERS/FILES

A pedestrian walks past signboards of Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ, Mizuho Bank and Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation in Tokyo, Japan.

Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group, Mizuho Financial Group and Sumitomo Mitsui Financial Group have said they are eyeing such investments, having previously been restricted to holding stakes of only 5-15 percent in start-ups.

Under pressure from weak loan demand, the megabanks see an opportunity to earn money through fintech, but are also aware of its potential to disrupt traditional business models.

The unpromising fintech environment in Japan - which was blindsided by the high-profile collapse of the Mt. Gox bitcoin exchange in 2014 when hackers stole an estimated $650 million worth of the digital currency - has seen some entrepreneurs go overseas for funding.

Junichi Horiguchi, co-founder and CEO of bitcoin service provider Zerobillbank Ltd, established his start-up in Tel Aviv last year to take advantage of Israel's advanced technology industry.

Investment in fintech start-ups by global banks and tech giants including Barclays, Google and Facebook is far more common in Israel than in Japan, he said.

"It's completely different over there," Horiguchi told Reuters. "Every month there are open innovation contests and (start-up) accelerator programmes."

Sales at Japan's fintech start-ups could jump to over half a billion dollars by 2020 as the use of technology such as blockchain increases, Yano Research Institute said in a report.

ECB loans 7.3b euros to banks at ultra-cheap rates

AFP, Frankfurt

The European Central Bank had lent 7.3 billion euros ($8.1 billion) in ultra-cheap loans to banks in the latest round of its plan to kick-start lending to households and businesses.

The uptake in the ECB's liquidity programme, known as TLTRO, was lower than in previous rounds. It will be succeeded in June by an even cheaper loan scheme.

In its seventh round of lending under the Targeted Long-Term Refinancing Operations (TLTROs), first launched in September 2014, a total 19 banks borrowed 7.3 billion euros at a fixed rate of zero percent, the ECB said.

The amount was much lower than in previous rounds: in December last year, 55 banks borrowed 18.3 billion euros while in September, 88 had borrowed 15.6 billion euros.

The TLTRO scheme was designed as a way of kick-starting lending in the euro area because the ECB makes the cash available to banks on condition they lend it on to households and businesses.

But the current programme is to be replaced by an updated liquidity programme from June, under which loans will be made available to banks for a period of four years at even better rates.

China industrial firms' Jan-Feb profits return to growth

REUTERS, Beijing

China's industrial profits returned to growth in the first two months of 2016, despite weakening business conditions and slowing economic growth in the world's second-largest economy.

Profits earned by Chinese industrial firms in January and February combined rose 4.8 percent from a year earlier, totaling 780.7 billion yuan ($119.8 billion) in the two-month period, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said on Sunday.

That compared with an annual fall of 4.7 percent in December 2015, which was the seventh straight month of decline.

The positive trend was driven in part by quicker product sales of industrial firms and a narrowing in the decline of industrial producer prices, said He Ping, an NBS official, in a statement accompanying the data.

The oil processing, electrical machinery and food sectors contributed significantly to growth in profits, He added, saying the sectors benefitted from lower oil prices.

Growth in the food industry was driven by strong demand as well as a decline in prices for some raw materials, the statement added.

The bureau always gives a combined profit figure for the first two months of each year to smooth out seasonal distortions caused by the Lunar New Year holiday, when most companies are closed for the long celebrations.

China's producer prices fell for the 48th month in a row in February though their pace of decline eased, highlighting the deeply entrenched pressures facing its manufacturers.