

Air Astra to fly on Dhaka-Saidpur route from today

RASHIDUL HASAN

Air Astra, the youngest commercial airline in Bangladesh, will start operating flights on the Dhaka-Saidpur-Dhaka route from today.

The country's third privately owned airline after US Bangla and Novoair is scheduled to operate two flights daily on the route with one-way fares starting from Tk 3,490, including taxes.

This will be the fourth domestic destination, where Air Astra is going to run its flights. The three other destinations are: Chattogram, Cox's Bazar and Sylhet.

Imran Asif, chief executive officer of Air Astra, said Saidpur is an important destination in the northern region as it connects eight districts, namely Rangpur, Dinajpur, Panchagarh, Nilphamari, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Gaibandha and Thakurgaon.

The flights have been scheduled conveniently

Flights will depart from Dhaka for Saidpur at 2:10pm and 8:00pm while return flights will start at 3:40pm and 9:30pm.

keeping the potential travellers in mind. As such, flights will depart from Dhaka for Saidpur at 2:10pm and 8:00pm while return flights will start at 3:40pm and 9:30pm.

Asif emphasised the importance of Saidpur as a crucial destination on the domestic route network.

"We will operate more flights on this route soon. We hope that our valued passengers will appreciate the fantastic service on the ground and in the air," he added.

Mozammel Haque Bhuiya, head of marketing at Air Astra, said there are huge economic and industrial activities at the export processing zones and tea processing units in the country's northern region.

"As a result, the flow of passengers on this route is high," Bhuiya told The Daily Star.

Considering all these factors, Air Astra is going to operate commercial flights on this route, he added.

The airline started operating flights to Chattogram and Cox's Bazar on November 24, 2022, and Sylhet on February 23 earlier this year.



Coworking spaces may be a relatively new concept in Bangladesh but they are becoming increasingly popular among small businesses. This is because other than being a cheap way to secure office space, coworking areas foster the sharing of ideas, experience and knowledge.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Coworking spaces helping small firms save big

MAHMUDUL HASAN

When Mohammad Oli Ahad founded Intelligent Machines back in 2018, finding a coworking space called Moar was a big relief as it helped save on numerous office expenses.

Employees of the artificial intelligence company, who are mostly IT engineers and coders, can work remotely given that they have the required digital devices, such as a laptop or smartphone.

Coworking spaces provide the option to lease desks and rooms on a monthly, daily or hourly basis with the equipment available, including Wi-Fi and dining space, being shared by the renters.

And so, freelancers, startups and even small teams of multinational companies in Bangladesh are increasingly opting for coworking spaces to keep costs low during the early stage of their business.

"This is a huge advantage, especially for those who start a new venture," Ahad said.

For example, Intelligent Machines, now a top artificial intelligence company, currently spends an average of just Tk 20,000 on rent each month.

"While very few people knew about it [coworking spaces] a few years back, the concept is getting popular now as more people are using the facility," he added.

Coworking spaces have been gaining popularity over the past six or seven years as small firms and individuals require affordable working spaces, especially in places like Dhaka where rent is exorbitant.

Nabila Nowrin, who co-founded Moar in 2015, said they provide affordable, productive and safe shared workspaces.

"Our mission is to support the sustainable growth of businesses in Bangladesh," she added. Hubdhaka became one of the first coworking spaces in Dhaka when it was launched in 2014 with global office space provider Regus having opened its facility in the country that same year.

The concept took off after 2015 with 15 firms, such as Cospace, Workstation 101, Bonik, Locus, AKOTA and Shuru Campus, now offering coworking spaces in the capital city.

Nowrin, who is an architect by profession,

said she started doing background research on coworking spaces in 2013 before going on to open Moar through a soft launch in Dhaka's Banani.

Initially, most of her clients were foreigners and so, the business took a hit following the terrorist attack on Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka in July 2016.

"But we officially launched in 2018 and then witnessed a steep rise in business and eventually opened another space in Dhanmondi," Nowrin added.

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Moar suffered another downturn after the outbreak of Covid-19 as the company was forced to close its doors during the lockdown period.

However, this led to more opportunity as many people came to understand that they can work in a hybrid model, doing away with the need for a permanent office.

She then said that many international companies, such as global ridesharing platform Uber, initially started their business in Bangladesh at Moar.

"In addition, local employees of cross-border digital payment solutions provider Payoneer still work here," Nowrin added.

She went on to say that other than affordability, another big advantage of renting coworking spaces is that it is a hassle-free experience as the owners take care of cleaning, security and other issues.

"A fledgling firm can just hire people and tell them to start working from a coworking space," she said.

Another benefit of coworking spaces is that they facilitate the sharing of ideas, knowledge and experience as people of different

backgrounds are all working in the same area.

Besides, fostering professional relationships in these spaces can even help people explore opportunities for work outside their particular area of expertise.

Moar opened a new branch on Gulshan link road in 2021 and relocated its Dhanmondi branch to Shaptak Square the following year.

Now, the company has a total of more than 15,000 square feet for rent across its three branches, which register a monthly revenue of over Tk 25 lakh collectively.

"We want more entrepreneurs to come and set up coworking spaces," Nowrin said.

Fahad Iba Wahab, founder of CoSpace, echoed the same.

"Coworking space is very popular idea worldwide but there are still very limited options for startups to get such facilities in Dhaka," he said. As per official statistics, 90 per cent of startups fail in just one year with most having invested heavily on office expenses, which are not recoverable.

"If there are more coworking spaces, people would get used to the idea and this business would gain popularity. Also, firms would not have to invest a big amount for an office," Wahab added.

CoSpace currently has three branches in Dhaka and plans to slowly expand with its fourth branch set for launch within three months.

Wahab said the huge sums that have to be paid as a security deposit when setting up coworking spaces is the biggest obstacle for them.

Eushra Nashmin, CEO of WorkStation101, said her company was founded keeping startups in mind.

"We want to help resolve all the struggles a startup goes through at the initial stage of business, namely finding the perfect office with all the required amenities to impress their clients," she added.

WorkStation was launched in January 2020 in Uttara and is currently working on expansion.

"Our aim is to help startups in such a way that they can fully concentrate on their business and take it to a level that it becomes so big they will need an office of their own. This will be our true achievement," Nashmin said.

WORKING FROM HOME

Balancing personal and professional responsibilities

MAMUN RASHID

As the world evolves, so does the way we work. The concept of working from home (WFH), once a luxury reserved for the self-employed, has become a necessity for many during the pandemic.

We have seen how organisations and employees benefitted during the pandemic as employees even could put in extra hours with a bit of more space created in their personal and family life.

Thus, companies are adopting hybrid (both from home and at the workplace) and remote work models. This has allowed professionals and businesses to recognise its advantages.

It is expected that the trend of working from home will persist due to technological advancements and benefits such as reduced commute time, higher productivity, and improved work-life balance.

However, with reduced Covid-19 risks and the lifting of social distancing restrictions, some organisations are returning to older models with the perception that the productivity under the WFH arrangement is lower than in-office work.

Despite its benefits, WFH comes with its own set of challenges. One of the biggest challenges is the lack of structure and routine, which can lead to procrastination and decreased productivity.

The difficulty of separating personal and professional lives can blur the lines between the two, causing a loss of work-life balance, less social interaction, and eventually lower job satisfaction and burnout among remote employees.

Moreover, WFH can pose significant struggles with communication and collaboration, with 21 per cent of remote workers citing communication as their biggest struggle in a study by Owl Labs.

It also presents unique ethical dilemmas, including time theft, privacy concerns and issues with professional conduct. In growth-backed organisations, physical visibility and professional conduct are crucial factors for employee growth.

WFH may also affect fairness and equity, as some employees may not have access to the same resources and tools as others depending on their home environment and circumstances. This can create unfair advantages for some employees and lead to feelings of resentment.

Furthermore, as the lines between personal and professional lives blur, this can lead to issues with professional conduct, such as inappropriate communication with colleagues or clients.

Attending and working physically at the office have their own advantages. Collaborative work is easier when team members are physically present in the same location. Face-to-face communication allows for more spontaneous conversations and brainstorming sessions.

In-person meetings also allow for nonverbal cues and body language, which can be crucial for effective communication. Moreover, being in the same physical space fosters a sense of community and strengthens the work culture and bonding, leading to a positive environment, all of which are crucial for the enrichment of a growing organisation and its people.

Working from an office can provide opportunities for professional development, such as attending training sessions or networking events and getting access to office resources. These opportunities can help employees build new skills and advance their careers.

Despite the challenges and benefits associated with WFH, the debate for its sustainability will continue, and WFH is likely here to stay. Thus, it is pertinent to foster the right balance in a flexible working environment for employees to grow along with the organisation.

The author is an economic analyst

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G7 finance chiefs move to diversify supply chains

AFP, Niigata

The G7 plans to launch a partnership scheme to diversify supply chains this year, the group's finance ministers said Saturday following talks in Japan ahead of a major summit next week.

The ministers did not directly cite a desire to reduce reliance on trade with China or Russia as motivation for the initiative, which focuses on clean energy technology.

But the United States has led a push for export controls on chip components to China, citing national security concerns, and US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen pointed to recent shocks to the global economy.

"Spillovers from Russia's war against Ukraine and disruptions caused by the pandemic have made clear the importance of diversified and resilient supply chains," she told reporters.

Japanese Finance Minister Shunichi Suzuki also said Covid had revealed "the downside of supply chains being too concentrated in one place".

In a joint statement, the Group of Seven's finance ministers and central bank chiefs said they hoped to launch the partnership in collaboration with the World Bank "by the end of this year at the latest".

The scheme, dubbed RISE - Resilient and Inclusive Supply-chain Enhancement - builds on guidance released in April, and will offer interested developing countries "finance, knowledge and partnerships".

How much will be spent on the programme has not been disclosed.



A customer shops for vegetables in the fruit and vegetable section of a Sainsbury's supermarket in east London. After narrowly avoiding recession last year, the UK economy advanced 0.5 per cent in January before flattening in February and sliding 0.3 per cent in March.

PHOTO: AFP/FILE

UK economy ekes out growth in Q1

AFP, London

Britain's economy grew 0.1 per cent over the first quarter despite weakening in March, official data revealed Friday, as output continues to be hit by high inflation and strikes.

After narrowly avoiding recession last year, the economy advanced 0.5 per cent in January before flattening in February and sliding 0.3 per cent in March, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement.

"The fall in March was driven by widespread decreases across the services sector," noted ONS director of economic statistics, Darren Morgan.

"Despite the launch of new number plates, cars sales were low by historic standards - continuing the trend seen since the start of the pandemic - with warehousing, distribution and retail also having a poor month," he added.