

Air Travel Update

66 airlines, 40+ nations and 3,249 weekly flights: Skies reopen after 2-year pandemic break

Saurabh Sinha / TNN / Mar 27, 2022, 01:16 IST



NEW DELHI: Six Indian and 60 foreign airlines from 40 countries — but none from China as of now — will from Sunday operate 3,249 weekly flights to and from India under the summer schedule as regular international flights resume after a gap of over two years.

A gradual increase in connectivity to the allowed number of flights is expected to lead to fares falling from the stratospheric levels of the bubble system, which lapses on Saturday. But they are likely to be higher than pre-Covid times due to Russia's war on Ukraine pushing up oil prices.

At 505 weekly flights, IndiGo will have the highest international departures on a standalone basis among all airlines, followed by Air India at 361, AI

Express at 340 and Emirates at 170. Three [Tata Group](#) airlines — AI, AI Express and Vistara — will have 757 weekly flights, including the only ones by an Indian carrier to North America, Europe, the Far East and Australia. IndiGo's Istanbul flight will resume from May 1; its pre-pandemic China flights have not yet restarted.

Tata's fourth airline, the eight-year-old AirAsia India, still does not have any international flights in the DGCA-approved schedule, indicating the possibility of an early merger with AI Express to fly abroad on the latter's licence.

Foreign airlines will again be able to offer one-stop transits to travel between India and rest of the world through their hubs — especially those in the Gulf and a few in Southeast Asia, like Singapore.

Airlines had applied for approval of their international schedules for this summer. These schedules will be effective from Sunday (March 27) to October 29 this year. "A total of 1,466 departures per week by six Indian carriers have been approved to 43 destinations in 27 countries, including UAE (Indians' biggest foreign destination), Singapore, Thailand, Qatar, Maldives, Saudi Arabia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Turkey, Malaysia, UK, France, Germany, the US, Canada, Australia, Israel, Japan, Hong Kong and Russia," a senior DGCA official said.

"Sixty foreign airlines of 40 countries have been allowed to operate 1,783 weekly flights to and from India. The airlines are from countries including Malaysia, Thailand, Turkey, the US, Germany, Singapore, Yemen, Sri Lanka, Bahrain, Maldives, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, the Netherlands, France, Japan, Russia, UAE, Australia, Qatar, Britain, Canada and Egypt," said the official. China is not on this list.

The DGCA-approved schedule indicates the maximum number of flights an airline can operate. The actual number operated depends on several factors, like demand for travel, financial health of airlines, and operating costs, which basically means how costly fuel is and where all can an airline overfly.

In its international network, the nearly 300-plane-strong IndiGo will have the maximum frequency on the Gulf and Southeast Asia routes. IndiGo's medium-haul play will begin in mid-2024 when it inducts the single-aisle

Airbus A321 XLRs that will fly nonstop to the Far East and Europe.

Air India has not stated if it plans to add US flights as [United](#) has suspended its Delhi-San Francisco and Mumbai-Newark flights because US carriers don't overfly Russian airspace, something that AI does and, therefore, can take the shortest possible routes in the long-hauls. Delta is yet to resume India operations after March 2020. American has only one nonstop as of now, a daily Delhi-JFK flight.

Tata Group's Vistara has for months been studying if it should lease planes to start US nonstops; high fuel price is coming in the way of the airline taking a call. While it remains to be seen whether AI and Vistara, the only two Indian carriers operating wide-body aircraft, try to increase their share of travel between India and North America, one-stop biggies like Emirates, Qatar Airways, Lufthansa and Singapore Airways are back in the game for the same.

Emirates, the biggest foreign airline in terms of flights to and from India, will operate 170 weekly flights between Dubai and nine Indian cities. It will have five and four dailies to Mumbai and Delhi, respectively. Air France-KLM said in a statement they will "progressively increase flight operations from India, starting with 20 weekly flights in April, and will expand frequency in May with 30 weekly flights. Air France will operate from four gateways — Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi and Mumbai — and KLM from Delhi and Mumbai".

Virgin Atlantic says it will launch a second daily service between [London Heathrow](#) and Delhi from June 1. "Coupled with its service from Mumbai, Virgin Atlantic will offer three daily flights from India, making it the airline's biggest flying programme ever to India," the airline said in a statement.

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