

Infrastructure seen halting India's aviation boom

India may be among the most happening places in the global aviation field, but its poor airport infrastructure is a major cause of concern and even threatens to retard the robust growth in the sector, international experts say.

With some 400 new aircraft set to join the fleet of Indian carriers at an estimated cost of \$80 billion and potential annual passenger traffic set to soar to 180 million over the next few years from the present 50 million, experts say the whole system can crumble if attention is not paid to improving airport infrastructure.

'India is going through a huge change in the aviation market. But it also has a challenging path ahead,' said Jaan Albrecht, chief executive of Star Alliance, the world's largest airline alliance with 17 carriers as members.

'For the kind of investment airlines in India are putting into buying aircraft, simulators and other associated areas, the government must ensure this money is matched by the airport infrastructure,' Albrecht told IANS on the margins of a global aviation meet here.

Experts say infrastructure is also coming in the way of India realising its full tourism potential, struggling to go beyond four million per annum, though some smaller countries like Thailand and Singapore are attracting lots more.

'India is a great country with glorious culture and heritage but unable to cash in fully on the global tourism interest because of poor infrastructure,' said aviation expert and commentator Kok Chwee Sim. 'India needs to improve all the facilities at its the airports, including multi-layer security.'

'One should understand that efficient security check at one point is much better than ineffective security at 10 places. The stories about passengers being stranded at airports during winter and the rainy season in India are horrific.'

Experts cite the example of the Suvarnabhumi Airport here as an example of how good and modernised airports can give an overall boost to business and tourism and compare it with the rundown Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi.

Suvarnabhumi, built some 10 years ago, is equipped with as many as 202 passport control checkpoints, 34 customs control checkpoints, 22 baggage conveyor belts, 460 check-in counters, 107 moving walkways, 102 elevators and 83 escalators.

While Delhi airport is plagued with regular traffic congestions, the airport here ensures smooth service with 120 parking bays, five of which can accommodate the Airbus A380 aircraft and handle 76 flights per hour.

In a similar vein, Paul Martin, director Southeast Asia and Indian subcontinent of Amadeus, a global travel distribution system, says bad airports and lack of hotel rooms will eventually halt India's travel and tourism growth.

'No other country is witnessing this kind of growth in its travel trade sector. But India's infrastructure

shortcomings are pulling it back. All players in the sector should work together to overcome it,' Martin told IANS.

But there are silver linings too, said Pradeep Panicker, vice president and head of strategic planning of the GMR group that has the mandate to modernise Delhi airport.

He says the Indira Gandhi International Airport will have an interim terminal ready by 2008 to ease traffic till a third terminal comes up by 2010. 'The airport's capacity will more than double to 37 million per year,' he said.

The Delhi Metro and a six-lane highway will connect with the twin floor terminal and the airport will have 65 aerobridges, which will accommodate 90 percent of the airport traffic.

'It will also have 130 check-in counters, 21 self-check counters, 72 immigration counters, 15 X-Ray screening areas, four wide-body handling belts and two normal belts for international passengers.'

Liz Mathew (© IANS / India eNews)