

NEW DAWN IN REGION'S AVIATION

Kenya-US direct flights herald trade, tourism boom for East Africa

It will take eight months before direct flights take off after vetting by the International Civil Aviation Organisation

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The EastAfrican

Trade between East Africa and the United States is set to increase after the latter's Federal Aviation Administration granted Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport a Category One status, finalising a pact that heralds the beginning of direct flights to America from Nairobi.

By attaining the highest International Aviation Safety Assessment status, Nairobi can now cement its position as the region's aviation hub for both passengers and cargo. Kenya's Transport Cabinet Secretary James Macharia said national carrier Kenya Airways and other interested local operators will fly directly from Kenya to the US once the necessary approvals and last point of departure (LPD) rights are granted.

RwandAir, the other major airline in the EAC says going through Kenya is also an opportunity the airline can explore.

Jimmy Musoni, the head of commercial planning at RwandAir, however noted that they were yet to undertake a study to weigh their options.

Direct flights to the US will

significantly reduce the time taken to move cargo between the US and East Africa — from seven days to as little as a day.

Burundi's Minister of Transport and Public Works Jean Bosco Ntunzenimana welcomed the news, saying it would help to cut costs and time for the country's fruit and fish exporters.

Burundi is currently the 198th largest trading partner of the US, with \$14 million in two-way goods. In 2015, the US imported goods worth \$8 million from Burundi — mainly coffee, tea, spices fish, seafood, art and antiques, wood and wood products.

Convenience

Passengers will also save on the time it takes transiting through Europe or the Middle East. Currently, due to JKIA's second-class status, travellers between East Africa and the US have to transit through London, Amsterdam, Istanbul, Dubai, or Addis Ababa, whose airports are approved for direct flights to the US.

Flying to the US from Nairobi and connecting via Addis Ababa takes approximately 30 hours and some layover time, which can be between one and 15 hours — at a cost of about \$1,620.

There are a few direct flights from Lagos, Nigeria to New York and a traveller from Nairobi connecting via Nigeria will take approximately 23 hours with layover time at a cost of \$2,600.

If one chooses to connect via Oliver Tambo Airport in Johannesburg from Nairobi, the journey will be 20 hours, exclusive of layover time and at a cost of \$1,800.

Direct flights are usually more expensive than connecting ones and so travellers should expect shorter but costlier flights.

But analysts say the direct flights will not affect the preferences of some East Africans in the diaspora, and tourists as most of them prioritise cost rather than duration of flight.

"If the direct flights end up being costlier than the connecting flights through Europe or the UAE, most of them will prefer a three-to-four hour layover in Amsterdam or Heathrow as they're travelling for leisure," said Benson Ngene, a strategy consultant at Dalberg Global Development Advisors.

Direct flights will help Kenya's tourism sector, which has been affected by frequent travel advisories occasioned by cross-border attacks by Somalia-based Al-Shabaab militants.

Long wait pays off

Although it may be a while before Kenya Airways commences direct flights to the US, the development is a major win for JKIA as the airport and national carrier KQ can now



The new international arrivals and departure terminal at JKIA.

Picture: File

consolidate US-bound traffic that has been leaking through hubs in Europe and the Middle East.

Director general of the Kenya Civil Aviation Authority Gilbert Kibe said it will take eight months before direct flights can take off, and the authority will have to be vetted by the International Civil Aviation Organisation on competence in overseeing the airspace.

The Kenya Airports Authority will also have to undergo a security audit by the US Transport Safety Authority to ensure passengers from Jomo Kenyatta International Airport pose no threat on US soil.

If a clean bill of health is

given, the airport will be given a last point of departure approval. Airlines wishing to run direct flights to the US from JKIA will then individually apply for commercial and technical licences.

For travellers, tickets to the US via Europe or the Middle East are bound to become cheaper as competition heats up.

"Following the attainment of Category One status, Kenya Airways will immediately apply for approval to codeshare with US airlines while concurrently pursuing approval for direct flights," the Cabinet Secretary said at a media briefing in Nairobi.

The move will be a boost for

the loss-making KQ, which is planning to offer direct flights. US airlines like Delta, which have also tried but failed to get approval in the absence of CAT 1 status, could soon revisit their plans.

Kenya's efforts to attain the higher status started in October 2014, when the FAA conducted a technical review of the safety oversight system in Kenya. This was followed by a Corrective Action Plan that was developed in Washington in January 2015 to address deficiencies identified in the technical review.

A total of 81 corrective actions were developed and all have since been "closed." Last year, FAA inspectors were in Kenya and cleared the way for the final audit after they were satisfied that the government had put in place all requisite measures.

Apart from coming up with a new Civil Aviation Law, Kenya also set up a Civil Aviation Tribunal as part of the requirements.

The government has invested



The govt has invested in the expansion of infrastructure which now boasts a new Terminal 1-A for arrivals and departures."

has not leveraged the Middle and Far East markets of Japan and Korea, or even markets like the French and German; after these countries stopped their own direct flights to Kenya.

"Cancelling a route is very easy but getting it back is a long process; we have been trying to persuade charter flights to fly direct from these countries to Kenya, but it is yet to happen," said Mr Macharia.

Flights between the US and Kenya could help sway other countries as well. In 2014, South Korea's largest airline stopped flights to Nairobi, the only destination it flew to in Africa over Ebola fears and is yet to resume them.

After failing the audit twice, Kenya allocated Ksh6.4 billion (\$64 million) to upgrade JKIA — built in the 1970s — and address security and safety issues, such as the ability to separate arriving and departing passengers in different terminals, and clearing buildings in the flight path.

East Africa imports aircraft, machinery, electrical equipment, medicine and chemicals from the US, and exports textiles, coffee, tea, fish, seafood and perishable horticultural products such as cut flowers and vegetables.

The direct flights will particularly enable East African businesses to exploit the currently under-utilised Agoa trade agreement with the US.

The Kenya Flower Council in a series of Tweets said direct flight to the US was "good news for flower sector."

in the expansion of airport infrastructure at JKIA which now boasts a new Terminal 1-A for international arrivals and departures.

Tourism and leisure

The chief executive officer of the Kenya Association of Hotel Keepers, Mike Macharia, said easy access was important for development of an economy. The association is in the middle of a study of how tourism numbers will be affected by the opening of direct flights.

"We are doing a value chain analysis, interviewing market players like grocers, butchers and drinks suppliers to see how easy access to and from the US will lead to a shift in trade," said Mr Macharia.

He said the tourism market