EASYJET MULLS VIABILITY OF SINAI ROUTE AFTER RUSSIA JET CRASH

News / Airlines

easyJet Plc said it's working on plans for redeploying aircraft from Sharm el-Sheik in Egypt to the Canary Islands and western Mediterranean should the suspected terror attack that downed a Russian jet on Oct. 31 lead to a collapse in UK demand.

Some 20,000 Britons were stranded in the resort after Prime Minister David Cameron halted scheduled flights amid concern a bomb was to blame for the tragedy. While easyJet will restart services when the ban is lifted, UK regional director Sophie Dekkers said contingency measures are being evaluated.

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easyJet ended flights to its only destination in Tunisia after an attack killed 30 Britons there in June, though Dekkers said the carrier currently envisages retaining Sharm el-Sheik as part of the winter 2016-2017 schedule, which it has begun to develop. UK travel curbs run until Nov. 25 and may be extended if the government deems security measures inadequate, she said.

"If the ban is lifted we will operate," Dekkers said in an interview at easyJet's Luton Airport base northwest of London. "The British traveler is quite resilient. If deemed safe by government, people will fly there." Some "big hotel deals" as room rates are cut will also lure tourists, she said.

Ski Routes

easyJet deploys about three times more seats to Sharm el-Sheik during the winter than in the summer, when temperatures can be unbearably high, representing 0.4 percent of its overall capacity, spokesman Paul Moore said.

A wholesale redeployment of aircraft this side of Christmas is unlikely since it takes six to eight weeks for tickets to go on sale, said Dekkers, who spoke at an event to celebrate easyJet's twentieth anniversary.

The Canaries, which offer reliable year-round sunshine, are likely to see an increase in seats, having proved popular after the Tunisia outrage, and easyJet will also be "topping up ski routes and second-home routes" and may add capacity to Cyprus, though the weather is less reliable, she said.

Last month's crash, which killed all 224 people aboard an Airbus Group SE A321 operated by Russia's Metrojet, is likely to prompt most airlines that fly to Sinai from Europe to re-evaluate their exposure, including TUI AG's Thomson Airways and Thomas Cook Plc, Dekkers said. That could create overcapacity that hurts fares to destinations such as the Canaries and a bed shortage in some resorts.

easyJet had already been seeking new winter routes amid concern that the Tunisia shootings might lead to a general move away from travel to North Africa and is in talks with the Greek tourism board to extend the season there by as many as four months.

The carrier had 4,500 customers in Sinai when the UK halted services last Wednesday. Some 2,325 were due to have been extracted by Tuesday, and all will be out by Sunday, Chief Executive Officer Carolyn McCall said at the Luton event. Efforts to evacuate people earlier were stymied by Egyptian flight curbs.

McCall said it's too early to evaluate the cost of the disruption.

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