BRITISH AIRWAYS: FURY AS AIRLINE REGAINS MONOPOLY ON FLIGHTS BETWEEN HEATHROW AND SCOTLAND

News / Airlines

British Airways this weekend regains its monopoly on flights connecting Scotland with Heathrow for the first time since 1982. The final Virgin Atlantic flights from Aberdeen and Edinburgh to Europe's busiest airport depart on September 26, following heavy losses by Sir Richard Branson's airline.

The Virgin flights, badged Little Red, were operated by the Irish airline, Aer Lingus. The links used slots surrendered by BA as part of the deal to take over its competitor BMI, which previously operated flights from Heathrow to Scotland.

Announcing the closure, Sir Richard said: "We were offered a meagre package of slots on a short-term basis and decided to lease a couple of planes and give it our best shot. The odds were stacked against us and sadly we just couldn't attract enough corporate business on these routes."

Unless another operator volunteers to take over the routes -- which looks unlikely -- the slots will revert to British Airways.

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BA has faced domestic competition at its Heathrow base since 1982 when British Midland (as BMI was then known) started flying to Glasgow. The airline has told The Independent it will not add extra flights to make up for the exit of Virgin Atlantic. Consequently, more than 20,000 seats a week between Scotland and Europe's busiest airport will be lost, pushing up fares and cutting choice for travellers.

The final Aberdeen-Heathrow flight on Virgin Atlantic was on sale on September 25 at 73 pounds, compared with 135 pounds for the cheapest BA service on the route.

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The unusual geography of Heathrow means that onward connections on airlines other than BA and its oneworld partners will become trickier. Virgin Atlantic served Terminal 2, home to the Star Alliance and also convenient for airlines such as Emirates. But the only Scottish links in future will be to and from Terminal 5 - home to British Airways and its sister airline, Iberia.

Tourism leaders have criticised the new monopoly. Marc Crothall, chief executive of the Scottish Tourism Alliance, said: "The loss of Virgin Little Red, and the connections and choice that it provided at Heathrow, is very regrettable. The Virgin service offered through-booking connections onto non-Oneworld operators which will now not be available at Heathrow."

"International tourists looking to access Scotland will therefore have less choice."

Mike Cantlay, chairman of VisitScotland, said UK airline business could be lost to other European hubs and carriers: "We have been working closely with airlines in the Star Alliance to ensure that they continue to enjoy good access to Scotland. This week, for example, we have had positive discussions with South African Airways who we understand will be promoting their service to Frankfurt and on to Scotland with Star Alliance partner Lufthansa."

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James Bream, research and policy director at Aberdeen & Grampian Chamber of Commerce, called for Heathrow flight slots freed up as a result of the proposed HS2 rail link to be ring-fenced for more distant UK destinations - and for the airport to be expanded:

"We fully support building a third runway at Heathrow, as this is the only option that will create more capacity."

Britain's biggest low-cost airline, easyJet, has pledged flights from Heathrow to Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Inverness - but only if and when a new runway is built.

27 SEPTEMBER 2015

SOURCE: THE INDEPENDENT
ARTICLE LINK:
https://ids.50skyshades.com/news/airlines/british-airways-fury-as-airline-regains-monopoly-on-flights-between-heathrow-and-scotland

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