HUNGARY OPENS DOOR FOR EMIRATES TO PROVIDE LOST AIR LINK TO U.S.

News / Airports / Routes

The United Arab Emirates is seeking to establish Budapest as a bridgehead for onward flights in a move that could allow two of the Gulf region's biggest airlines to carry people between central Europe and the U.S.

The application for so-called fifth-freedom rights concerns services to two points beyond Hungary, Saif Al Suwaidi, director general of the U.A.E.'s General Civil Aviation Authority, said in an interview, adding that those locations have yet to be determined, but could include the U.S.

Such flights can make a huge difference in the growth of airlines, opening up completely new markets that they wouldn't otherwise be able to access. Since 2013, Emirates, the biggest U.A.E. airline, has been extending a Dubai-Milan service on to New York, tapping travel between prosperous northern Italy and the eastern U.S. with Airbus Group SE A380s seating more than 450 people.

Hungary is unusual in lacking a flag carrier after the collapse of Malev Zrt. in 2012, with Beijing and Qatar the only long-haul routes in addition to Emirates' Dubai service. Peter Szijjarto, the

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country's foreign minister, said in Dubai that the U.A.E. application had been received, while his office added that the government is "open to such cooperation" and aims to start discussions soon.

Connectivity Gap

Al Suwaidi said the Budapest initiative comes as the U.A.E. works to convince countries lacking fifth-freedom provisions to permit such access — "especially where there is no connectivity, such as Hungary-U.S." — though airlines must decide if they want to take up accords put in place. An onward trip to London would be equally possible, he said, though the route is already well-served.

A Hungarian deal could open the door for Emirates, the biggest airline by international traffic, to provide flights to the U.S. as an extension of the daily Dubai-Budapest service. The carrier told Bloomberg it has "no immediate plans" for such operations.

Tim Clark, the company's president, said last year that Emirates was looking at fifth-freedom opportunities and that Greece had asked it to consider extending flights from Dubai to the U.S., which has no Athens service. Proposals from the U.A.E. for Swiss flights to carry on to Mexico may be resolved this month, the Swiss Federal Office of Civil Aviation said Thursday.

Indirect Access

Etihad Airways could also benefit from an expanded Hungary-U.A.E. accord, though it doesn't currently have flights to Budapest. The Abu Dhabi-based company declined to comment on the government's application.

Fifth-freedom flights have proved controversial in the past because of the indirect market access the provide. Delta Air Lines Inc. says Emirates' Milan-New York flight is typical of the exploitation of air treaties by Mideast carriers to tap passenger flows unrelated to their home countries, though it and Alitalia SpA, Italy's biggest airline, failed in legal challenges to the service.

Emirates' Budapest-Dubai flight already gives Hungary a one-stop link to major cities in the Asia-Pacific, Middle East and parts of Africa, but is of no help in providing routes to the Americas.

Malev's collapse in February 2012 after 66 years means people must travel to other European cities to get to and from Hungary even on popular long-haul routes. Budapest Ferenc Liszt airport's website shows they can fly to New York via 12 other hubs, including London Heathrow, Paris Charles de Gaulle, Amsterdam Schiphol and Deutsche Lufthansa AG's Frankfurt and Munich bases.

Discount specialist Wizz Air Ltd., which is based in Budapest, has helped restore much of the European connectivity lost with Malev's demise, but doesn't offer intercontinental services.

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