

Air Astra eyes expansion after receiving 90pc load factor in maiden month: CEO

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Dhaka : The new private airline Air Astra received better-than-expected results in load factor while completing its maiden month of operations on two domestic routes of the country - Dhaka-Cox's Bazar and Dhaka-Chattogram. The Dhaka-Cox's Bazar flights of the airline had a load factor of 94 per cent while the Dhaka-Chattogram flights had 84 per cent.

Imran Asif, Chief Executive Officer, Air Astra said this while talking to The Bangladesh Monitor at his office in the capital recently.

The latest local entrant to the country's aviation industry commenced flight operations from Dhaka to Chattogram and Cox's Bazar on November 24, 2022.

Air Astra's commercial operations began with three flights a day on the Dhaka-Cox's Bazar-Dhaka route and two flights on the Dhaka-Chattogram-Dhaka route. The airline later increased the frequencies to four on each route, witnessing great passenger demand.

Air Astra now operates flights with two ATR 72-600 aircraft.

However, the CEO mentioned the airline is now focusing its efforts on increasing its footprint and inventory.

The carrier will add eight more aircraft to its fleet in 2023. One of them will be brought from France in the first week of January 2023 and another by the end of January, 2023, said the CEO.

Afterwards, the airline plans to launch flights to three more domestic destinations - Jashore, Saidpur, Sylhet and Rajshahi.

"We will operate two weekly flights to Saidpur and Jashore each. We will only be able to make a total of four trips per day with one aircraft as the watchtowers at airports close after the evening," the CEO added.

Asked about air passenger numbers going down on Dhaka-Jashore and Dhaka-Barishal route due to the Padma Bridge, the CEO said it is only temporary and the figures will soon pick up.

"Dhaka-Barishal travellers mostly reside in the south of Dhaka as per our survey. So, they prefer to travel by road because it is easier. However, few who live in the north still prefer flights," explained the CEO.

Also, the road between Barishal city and the airport is in poor condition. If the road connectivity is improved, there will be a small group who would still travel by air on Dhaka-Barishal route, he further mentioned. Nevertheless, after the opening of Padma Bridge, many only travelled by the first of its kind bridge in the country out of pure enthusiasm and curiosity. Hence, travel by the bridge will not be a regular thing as there is never any alternative to air travel, claimed Imran Asif.

On top of it, Bangladesh has a strong economy. Our domestic aviation sector showed its resilience even amid the Covid-19 pandemic with 2 per cent growth. Now, domestic air travel has even surpassed pre-pandemic levels, rejoiced the CEO.

Meanwhile, Air Astra is going to launch its own sales outlets in different areas of the country from January 2023 so that the airline can provide passengers with after sales support and walk-in services.

"The Uttara sales office will be ready soon. We are also looking for spaces in Gulshan, Banani and Motijheel areas of Dhaka to open more sales outlets while the opening of the Chattogram sales outlet is also underway," mentioned Imran Asif.

Air Astra plans to stand out from the other existing airlines operating domestically in the country with the best service quality and skilled manpower.

A training center has been opened at Uttara where the airline is currently training their employees to ensure quality service to the passengers, claimed the CEO.

By the end of 2023, Air Astra plans to start international flights, concluded Imran Asif.