

Bangladesh shows remarkable resilience against all adversities

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Dhaka : The year 2021 has been a roller coaster ride for the travel trade as a whole, of the country and elsewhere in the world. The year began with the aftermath of the devastating Covid-19 pandemic, when the entire travel industry including airlines, travel agents, tour operators, hotels, resorts, and restaurants were seeking out recovery measures for survival. Finally, it ended with remarkable resilience shown by all, as they managed to make not only efforts to recover but also to propel further in the years ahead.

Concerned stakeholders may argue that a full recovery may take 1-2 years more, but it is of no doubt that the initiation of massive development works and operation expansion activities taken in 2021 indicates that a great boom in travel trade is on our way in the coming years.

Development works across all airports

2021 saw the country's airports to start going through massive development works. Braving the pandemic, the work on the construction of the third terminal of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in the capital has been progressing in full swing. Already, over 22 per cent construction works have been completed, as informed by the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh.

CAAB Chairman Air Vice Marshal M Mafidur Rahman said the construction of the

Third Terminal would be completed on time which is 2023. State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Md Mahbub Ali added it will match the world's most modern airports. Once completed, the world-class terminal can serve twice the number of passengers_ over two twenty million a year_ Dhaka Airport is handling currently, the minister hoped.

He further informed that metro rail will be connected to this terminal. "The terminal will be fully automated. A foreigner can realise the beauty of Bangladesh by setting foot in this beautiful airport," he added.

The expansion work of the Cox's Bazar Airport runway was also inaugurated by the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2021 as part of a project to make it an international standard first maritime airport by 2024.

The government has taken the initiative to upgrade the airport through extending the runway by reclaiming land from the sea so that international flights operated by wide-body aircraft can land at the airport.

After completion of the project, there will be a new 10,700 feet long runway. The detailed design and construction of temporary facilities, including a site office, road networks, jetty and concrete batching plant has been substantially completed.

Night operation at Cox's Bazar also began for the first time which is also another milestone for 2021.

Chattogram Airport has already witnessed extension of the cargo area, as huge economic and trade activities are taking place in the port city. Even the terminals, both passenger and cargo are to go through expansion works as well.

Sylhet Airport's runway expansion work is already done. Any type of aircraft including B-777 and B-787 can land and take off now. Refueling facilities of the aircraft have also been established. Now the terminal expansion works are underway. which is to be completed by 2023.

Saidpur Airport has been decided to be made a regional airport for South or Southeast Asia. It is to go through runway expansion of 10,000 feet too.

Similarly, as CAAB mentioned, they are in efforts to develop Jashore, Rajshahi, and Ishwardi airports of the country as well.

New cross-country air routes

In 2021, Bangladesh entered into a new era of domestic aviation as for the first time multiple new cross-country long-haul routes were launched without any connection to Dhaka.

Flag carrier Biman Bangladesh Airlines launched direct flights from Saidpur to Cox's Bazar on October 7. Mohammed Salahuddin, General Manager, Marketing of Biman said the carrier will also resume direct flights on Chattogram-Jashore route and Sylhet-Chattogram route.

Biman also launched direct flights from Sylhet to Cox's Bazar on October 7.

The largest private airline of the country US-Bangla too started flights on Jashore-Chattogram, Saidpur-Chattogram and Jashore-Cox's Bazar. The first two routes were inaugurated on September 30 while the latter on October 1.

M Shafiqul Islam, Head of Marketing and Sales, US-Bangla said, the airline will soon launch flights on Saidpur-Cox's Bazar, Sylhet-Chattogram-Cox's Bazar, Barishal-Chattogram and Saidpur-Jashore routes.

The airline also marked a milestone in 2021 by becoming the first Bangladeshi carrier to launch flights to Maldives on November 19.

Tourism recovery

With a view to bringing discipline in the business of tour operation in the country and kick-starting its recovery process following the pandemic, the government has made registration mandatory for all tour operators and guides under the provision

of the law.

Even though the country's tourism master plan had been shelved temporarily due to the coronavirus pandemic, Bangladesh Tourism Board has been progressing with other plans, policies and guidelines to better equip the tourism industry to flourish. The efforts include formation of Tourism Human Capital Development Strategy 2021-2030, promotional works to showcase country's tourism potential in the global arena, training and workshops for the industry stakeholders, rural and community tourism development, establishing more facilities at tourist places, partnership with international organisations such as UNWTO and OIC etc.

BTB, as mentioned by its CEO Javed Ahmed, is also in efforts to launch e-visas for the neighbouring tourists as well as to establish an iconic landmark and international standard training institute.

The Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina during the inauguration of the runway expansion works of the Cox's Bazar Airport, mentioned that the government is planning to develop Cox's Bazar as a tourism hub with foreign tourist zone and many other international standard facilities.

Sonadia Deep will be turned into an eco-park while Shahparir Deep, Saint Martin and Maheshkhali Deep will be developed to make Cox's Bazar one of the most attractive tourist places, the Premier shared.

By the end of 2021, in winter which is the peak season, the country's tourist spots were buzzing with crowds. The most popular destination Cox's Bazar welcomed thousands of tourists while the other areas too enjoyed a great influx of tourists. Domestic tourism has seen a boom following the pandemic in 2021, while regional international travel is also on the rise.

OTAs lead travel into digital era

The pandemic came more of a blessing than a curse for the online travel agencies of Bangladesh. With the resurrection of the industry, following Covid-19, the shift to online became more apparent.

Today, there are several OTAs running operations in the country meeting the needs of e-commerce in travel trade. By 2025, OTAs market share is predicted to reach 45 per cent.

OTAs are not only providing air ticket booking services only but also hotel booking, visa supports and other relevant travel services.

Salman Bin Rashid Sayem, CEO of Flight Expert, said, the travel market of Bangladesh is expected to grow to USD 7 billion by 2025 and OTAS will contribute to 1 percent of the GDP.

New airlines

In 2021, we witnessed many new Bangladeshi airlines getting NOC from CAAB such as Air Astra, Fly Dhaka and NXT Air (cargo). From 2022, these airlines are scheduled to begin domestic flights while they have plans to go international later.

The emergence of the new airlines indicates the great potential Bangladesh's aviation industry has. A few more airlines are down the pipeline to get approval from CAAB. Meaning, we will see the aviation industry of the country prosper to a great extent in the coming years.

Hotel-restaurant boom

After suffering over a year in 2019 due to Covid-19, the hotels and restaurants of the country in 2021 got the opportunity to bounce back bigger and better, except for city hotels. The others, mostly resorts and hotels in tourist sites, experienced a boom in visitors.

During winter, the peak season, the hotels and restaurants of mostly all tourist destinations remain fully booked.

We are even witnessing new hotels coming up in the market. Another new five-star property Hotel Sheraton Dhaka opened its doors to guests in 2021.

The banquets across the country remain busy hosting weddings one after another during this winter.

All this shows how Bangladesh has effectively started recovering from the woes of the pandemic and the travel industry is on its path to significant glory. Some hurdles may remain, but there is no doubt, we will see more prosperity in travel trade in the days to come.

International travel to and from Bangladesh has already recovered 80 per cent while domestic travel has even surpassed pre-pandemic times, with a recovery of 120 per cent. As international destinations still have some restrictions in place, it is encouraging travel enthusiasts to flock to domestic sites. This is allowing subsidiaries like hotels, airlines and others in the trade enjoy a boom in business.

With gradual uplifting of restrictions in foreign destinations, international travel, initially regional and then long-haul, is sure to pick up too in the promising days ahead.