

Flight Expert collapse exposes dark side of Bangladesh's online travel boom

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Dhaka : Flight Expert, once a shining star in Bangladesh's online travel sector, has collapsed in spectacular fashion, leaving thousands of customers stranded and millions of takas unaccounted for. The scandal, now one of the largest consumer fraud cases in recent years, has shaken public confidence in digital travel platforms and highlighted structural vulnerabilities in the booming online travel ecosystem.

From market leader to fugitive

Founded in 2017, Flight Expert positioned itself as a convenient, affordable, and tech-savvy alternative for travelers seeking domestic and international flights, hotel bookings, and holiday packages. The company grew rapidly, fueled by aggressive marketing campaigns, attractive discounts, and partnerships with airlines and other service providers.

The collapse became official on August 2, 2025, when Flight Expert's offices were found locked, helplines unanswered, and social media channels abandoned. Panic spread rapidly among customers—from passengers to sub-agents—who had prepaid for trips, including high-value Umrah packages and corporate bookings. The total amount lost could be in the hundreds of crores, according to industry sources.

Management on the run

Police investigations have led to the arrest of three senior managers - Sakib Hossain (Head of Finance), Sayeed Ahmed (Chief Commercial Officer), and AKM Shahadat Hossain (Chief Operating Officer).

However, the company's Managing Director Salman Bin Rashid Shah Sayeem and his father MA Rashid Shah Samrat are believed to have fled the country, with authorities suspecting them of orchestrating a large-scale scheme to divert customer funds while avoiding payment settlements with airlines.

"The scale of the misappropriation is massive. Flight Expert collected advance payments from thousands of customers without ensuring the corresponding payments reached airlines. This is a textbook case of financial fraud in the OTA sector," said industry stakeholders.

Human cost

The fallout for customers is devastating:

- Umrah pilgrims lost huge sums of money, with packages disappearing overnight.
- Group tour operators have been forced to refund clients from their own pockets after airlines rejected tickets issued by Flight Expert, as those were already cancelled by the OTA, while customers remained oblivious.
- Individual travelers missed family events, business trips, and medical appointments.

"We booked a Singapore holiday package worth BDT 5.5 lakh. The tickets were never issued to the airline. Our money is gone, and our dream trip is ruined," said a victim of the collapse.

Public awareness about discount malpractices

Another concern in the OTA sector is financial malpractice through unrealistic discounts. Typically, OTAs receive a commission of around 7 percent from airlines. However, to lure customers, many offer discounts of up to 20 percent-far exceeding their legitimate earnings. Experts say this practice is unsustainable and often masks financial mismanagement or fraudulent activity.

Consumers should exercise caution:

- Avoid chasing heavy, unrealistic discounts. They may be a red flag for scams.
- Do not depend solely on sub-agents or intermediaries whose behavior seems suspicious. Verify credentials before making payments.
- Prefer direct, traceable booking methods and consult multiple sources before committing large sums.

Bank partnerships: trust misplaced

One reason Flight Expert gained rapid public trust was its promotional partnerships with leading banks. Through co-branded credit card campaigns, reward point offers, and easy installment payment schemes, the company presented itself as a reliable and professional operator.

Many consumers assumed that these partnerships acted as implicit endorsements, creating a false sense of security. Experts now warn that banks need to exercise greater due diligence before associating with fintech or digital travel platforms, as reputational and financial risks are significant when such agencies fail.

"Banks must recognize that their logos convey credibility to the public. Customers often equate a bank partnership with trustworthiness, which is not always accurate. Financial institutions should audit partners thoroughly and monitor their financial stability," said a consumer finance analyst.

The Flight Expert scandal demonstrates the dangers of perceived credibility through association: while bank partnerships can help grow a brand, they also amplify consumer exposure when companies mismanage funds or operate fraudulently.

Industry pattern: not the first, not the last

Flight Expert's downfall is part of a worrying trend in Bangladesh's online travel sector. In the past five years, several OTAs, including Haltrip, 24tk.com, and Let's Fly, have collapsed, leaving consumers out of pocket and damaging the sector's reputation.

Common factors contributing to these failures include:

- Rapid, aggressive expansion fueled by heavy promotions
- Weak regulatory oversight
- Lack of financial transparency
- Sudden escape by management with customers' money
- Industry veterans warn that the digital travel sector is growing faster than oversight mechanisms, creating vulnerabilities for both consumers and legitimate businesses.

"Without systemic reforms, the entire online travel ecosystem risks collapsing under the weight of public distrust," warned industry insiders.

Cautionary tale for digital marketplace

As Bangladesh embraces digital commerce, Flight Expert serves as a stark warning: unchecked growth, combined with inadequate oversight, invites disaster. The case highlights the interconnected risks in the online travel sector—from fraudulent operators to unwitting consumers and institutional partners.

For thousands of victims, the aftermath is grim. Their trips are cancelled, funds lost, and confidence shattered. For banks and other institutional partners, the scandal emphasizes the importance of due diligence when lending credibility to digital platforms.

Unless the government, regulators, and industry stakeholders act swiftly, experts warn that another "Flight Expert" collapse is inevitable.

The lesson is clear: trust must be earned and continuously verified, not assumed from branding, partnerships, or unrealistic promises of discounts.

