AIR INDIA PLANS NON-STOP FLIGHT TO WASHINGTON DC

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After San Francisco, Air India (AI) plans to launch direct flights to Washington DC and other cities in the U.S.

AI already operates non-stop flights to three U.S. cities - New York, Chicago and Newark, with operations to San Francisco scheduled to commence from December 2.

"AI is actively pursuing to connect more cities in the U.S. (with India). A New Delhi-Washington flight is also in the pipeline," said civil aviation minister Ashok Gajapathi Raju.

"AI connects the country like no other airline. Today the Maharaja is the one of the most impoverished Indians, and I hope AI comes out of its poverty," Raju said, indicating to the financial troubles of the national carrier, whose mascot is the Maharaja.

A senior official at Air India said the launch flight, both to and from San Francisco, has already been sold out and the demand was "tremendous".

"This new flight will be a boon for the Indian diaspora in the U.S. West Coast, making travel easy and convenient for students," the carrier said in a release.

"Next year, we will launch many new flights... 2016 will be a year of consolidation and growth for AI," said the airline's new chairman and managing director Ashwani Lohani.

"The U.S. is the biggest holiday destination for Indian travellers, with an estimated 10 lakh leisure travellers visiting the country every year. Non-stop flights to the U.S. attract good traffic," said aviation expert Rajji Rai.

The Delhi-San Francisco flight will be of a duration of close to 17 hours. The flight will leave Delhi

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on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday, while the return service will be on Thursday, Saturday and Monday. With a three-cabin configuration, the flight will have eight seats in first class, 35 in business and 195 in economy.

Air India used to serve Washington via New York, but the service was discontinued a few years ago. The carrier also had flights to Los Angeles in California, which was discontinued before the merger of Indian Airlines with Air India in 2011.

Air India has flights to 34 international destinations spread across the U.S., Europe, Far-East and South-East Asia, and the Gulf.

29 NOVEMBER 2015

SOURCE: HINDUSTAN TIMES
ARTICLE LINK:
https://ut.50skyshades.com/news/airports-routes/air-india-plans-non-stop-flight-to-washington-dc

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