SINGAPORE AIRLINES TO LAUNCH CHANGI-CANBERRA-WELLINGTON A330 FLIGHTS?

News / Airports / Routes



Singapore Airlines seems set to start Canberra's first long-haul international services with a four times weekly service from its hub at Changi Airport, which will continue as a tag flight to the New Zealand capital Wellington. The SQ service, expected to be announced by Singapore Airlines chief executive Goh Choon Phong next week in Canberra, according to the Australian Financial Review, will utilise Airbus A330-300 aircraft, the smallest operated by mainline Singapore Airlines.

Little information about the service timetable is known, although given what the Fin reported about the Canberra-Wellington tag flights one can surmise that the SIN-CBR leg will be a red-eye overnight, with a roundtrip to WLG leaving in the morning and returning in the afternoon, followed by another overnight flight between CBR and SIN.

But if the announcement pans out, it will be a real coup for the capital cities, their airports, and the international passengers – often high value government customers – who travel between them.

An A330-300 would be far and wide the largest aircraft to regularly serve both Canberra and Wellington, and the Singapore Airlines flight would be the first international tag flight from Australia to Wellington — as well as the first nonstop between the two capitals. Wellington Airport is currently served only by narrowbody aircraft, with the largest commercial jet regularly serving the airport the Airbus A320 fleets of Air New Zealand and Jetstar. Canberra too is currently only

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served by narrowbody aircraft after Qantas retired the 767 from its fleet in late 2014.

Singapore Airlines' A330-300s seat 285 passengers, outfitted with 30 Weber 7811 angled lie-flat seats up front in business class and 255 economy seats at 32in pitch in a 2-4-2 configuration down the back.

Both Virgin Australia and Air New Zealand have separate codesharing and alliance arrangements in place with Singapore Airlines (and both Singapore Airlines and Air New Zealand are major shareholders in Virgin Australia).

A capital idea?

Canberra Airport, with support from the ACT Government, has long lobbied for international services, particularly since its main runway extension was opened in 2006 and its $350 million terminal redevelopment was progressively opened from 2010. The airport terminal's western concourse, which is home to the capital's Virgin Australia flights and opened in March 2013, incorporates space for customs and immigration facilities and gates that can accommodate international flights.

Air Pacific (now Fiji Airways) briefly operated flights to Fiji's capital of Suva in 2004, Canberra's only direct scheduled international services to date, as the airport has suffered from its close proximity to Sydney Airport.

Singapore Airlines, along with Air New Zealand, has long been considered a possible contender to operate international flights to Canberra. Singapore-Canberra-Wellington flights would not only allow Singapore Airlines to offer one-stop connections from Canberra to its extensive Asian and European networks, but, thanks to the open skies arrangement between Australia and New Zealand, allow it to carry passengers nonstop between the nations' capital cities for the first time.

Canberra flights also allow Singapore Airlines to add more capacity to south-eastern Australia without adding more flights to Sydney, which it already serves up to five times daily.

Unlike Sydney, Canberra is not restricted by a curfew, but on the other hand can be regularly affected by fog in winter. Canberra has a population of around 390,000 but has a much larger population catchment as the NSW Southern Highlands, NSW South Coast and regional centres like Wagga Wagga are within comfortable driving distance of Canberra.

Another New Zealand tag flight dramatically increases trans-Tasman and WLG capacity

As much so for Canberra, the importance of long-haul service (even via a tag flight) to Wellington Airport and New Zealand's capital cannot be understated. The airport and city have long sought to secure services to reduce the number of connections required to reach WLG, which is currently served primarily via Sydney and Auckland.

It's likely the Singapore Airlines A330-300 is currently not capable of flying to Singapore nonstop out of Wellington's short, geographically constrained runway with a meaningful payload of passengers and freight, hence the tag flight via Canberra making both economic and operational sense.

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Australian Aviation profiled Wellington Airport's ongoing attempts to extend its runway in the July 2015 edition. Its short runway 16/34 – 2,081m in total, including displaced thresholds of 130m at the north end and 106m at the south end – dates back to 2009 when a 130m extension was built into the rocky, deep Wellington Harbour and Cook Strait at either end, respectively.

Wellington Airport's airline development manager Mike Vincent told Australian Aviation at the time, "Wellington is targeting smaller widebody aircraft around the 300-seat size (Boeing 787-8, Airbus A350-900) as the market has a strong business component which would value frequency. A daily service with a smaller widebody would be preferable to a four times a week large aircraft," Vincent noted.

It seems like that's exactly what WLG is going to be seeing with SQ's A330-300. Yet the SQ service could well be a tentative Singaporean toe dipped into the chilly waters of the Tasman Sea. If the service via Canberra works out, Wellington could well be a candidate for an upgrade to Singapore Airlines' incoming Airbus A350-900 aircraft.

Airbus's latest twinjet might provide a greater opportunity, Vincent said. "I think probably the A350 will be a slightly better aircraft for Wellington than the 787. What's tending to happen at the moment is that aircraft are getting larger and more fuel-efficient. But also the engine thrusts are getting lower as well, as a result. When you put in a runway it is all about power and weight ratio. The 787 probably doesn't have the same power to weight ratio as, let's say, the A350 does."

The A350's capability – mainly around thrust and weight – changes the game compared with the earlier A330. As WLG's Mike Vincent noted, "it's not going to need to take off with a full payload out of Wellington if it's going to somewhere like Singapore, because Singapore's only 4,600nm [8,520km] from Wellington. At the end of the day, there will still be a payload restriction, but it probably will be a freight restriction. So the aircraft will be able to land at Wellington with a full payload. They'll be able to carry at least a full passenger load to these places, but there probably will be a freight restriction."

Singapore Airlines is playing particularly well with local partner Air New Zealand at the moment, following a resumption of NZ-metal services from AKL to SIN, an upgrade of SQ's AKL flights to an Airbus A380, and the continuation of Singapore's Boeing 777-200ER flights to Christchurch.

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