

Ireland-Singapore link may be on the cards - but just not yet



The business class cabin of Singapore Airlines on display at its main Changi Airport hub Photo: Bloomberg

Is Dublin Airport looking to get yet another route to Asia? Singapore Airlines has met authorities here to look at operating a direct route from Dublin to Singapore, albeit not in the near future, informed sources told this column. This year has seen the keenly-anticipated launches of routes to Beijing with Hainan Airlines and Hong Kong with Cathay Pacific, opening up massive potential markets for Irish exporters. Executives are believed to have visited Ireland for discussions, but the airline insists "there aren't any active negotiations or discussions on a new Ireland-Singapore route". The statement adds that "we always keep a watching brief on opportunities, including in Ireland". However, aviation sources have told this column that Singapore is looking like a longer-term project, though any arrival here is destined to be years, not months, away. In the shorter term, talks are well progressed on another long-haul connection, as yet undisclosed, to Ireland from a key destination, the Sunday Independent understands. While headlines are grabbed by Ireland's growing transatlantic connectivity, the market going east is hotly contested too, and ever-changing. Recently, Etihad Airways revealed that it's cutting capacity from Dublin to its giant Abu Dhabi hub. It's ending its twice-daily A330-200 service from January 15, replacing it with a daily B777-300ER flight. The good news for passengers is that the 777 has larger capacity - with 28 seats in business class, so it will only be an overall 20pc reduction in seat numbers - but the move will impact on onward connections from the UAE.

UAE rival Emirates, meanwhile, is reporting high load factors this year to this column, while another major hub player, Turkish Airlines, is enjoying load factors in at least the high 80s. Hainan Airlines, which commenced flights between Dublin and Beijing in June, is reducing its service from four times a week to three for the coming winter from October 28, and told this column earlier this year that the route will be given plenty of time to bed in for the business market. Dublin Airport has been working hard to secure services to the east, with Delhi a preferred option, DAA CEO Dalton Philips said earlier this year. It's believed that the airport had been in contact with Air India for "at least four years" over the last decade about a direct link to the sub-continent. Singapore Airlines shut its Irish office which sold flights from Ireland via the UK, in 2014 due to increased competition from Gulf carriers, but still sells into the market via the UK. Any move to ramp that up would be another attractive option for the business traveller, particularly to South-East Asia and the key Australian market. It's also a constant winner of airline awards, offers first class suites, business class, premium and standard economy on many routes, including to Ireland's nearest - Manchester - using Airbus A350-900 aircraft to its world-class Changi Airport hub in Singapore. One aviation expert said "airlines and airports are in talks all the time", with carriers having a long list of routes they are interested in, and airports keen to woo their own list of targeted carriers. Business travellers are travelling further afield, as Irish companies look to ease their reliance on the UK market post-Brexit. Latest figures from the Irish Exporters Association, show a marked rise in applications for business visas for further-flung destinations. China tops the list this year, followed by Russia, India, Nigeria and Saudi Arabia. China alone accounted for 43pc of all visa applications, with second-placed Russia accounting for 12pc. "We have had a lot of requests from companies for help with visas and doing business in these new markets," Simon McKeever, chief executive of the association, told the Sunday Independent. The body compiled the list from its Consular Services, which helps all EU and most other nationals who have an Irish residency stamp to obtain business and tourist visas for most countries in the world. "With the uncertain future of Brexit still a looming issue for the Irish export industry, diversification of export markets is one of the key ways of managing Brexit risk and over reliance on the UK market," he said. Usage of its services, which also assist with legalisation, notarisation plus certification through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, increased by 13pc in H1 of this year, compared to the same period in 2017. McKeever said that following the rebound from the crash, Irish companies "went back to markets that they knew" but that has now changed. And connectivity has helped, even though the new markets present challenges. "It's a different commitment for companies that in the past may have done business in, say, Birmingham, and could have been there and back in a day. Now it's a case of investing time in far-off markets," he added. The biggest jumps in travel have been to Saudi Arabia (108pc), followed by Nigeria - "food as well as oil sectors," said McKeever.