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Small airlines cash in on banditry, rising demand

SMALL airlines are capitalising on Mozambique's security nightmare by offering services to Maputo and destinations deep inside the country. Road transport between SA and Mozambique has been severely curtailed by banditry.

Businessmen wishing to investigate development opportunities have to go by air. SAA in conjunction with the Mozambique national carrier LAM offers regular services to and from Johannesburg.

Two independent SA airlines, Ross Air and Metavia, saw a need for smaller, more flexible services to Mozambique.

Jets

Ross Air is a charter company. It cannot sell seats on a scheduled flight, but hires out an aircraft for a destination.

Metavia operates scheduled flights from Johannesburg to Nelspruit and Maputo twice a day, as well as a shuttle service from Komatipoort to Maputo three times a week. It will soon start regular flights from Komatipoort to Xai Xai, north of Maputo, for Mozambique mineworkers.

Metavia director Deirdre Ward says the company start-

ed six years ago and now has a fleet of two Piper Chieftans. It leases three more. Piper Chieftans seat nine passengers.

Mrs Ward says: "Being a small company we have greater flexibility than the large. We pick up a lot of the overflow from SAA. If there is exceptional demand we can generally fill another aircraft quickly. Conversely, we can reduce the payload."

Mrs Ward says there is a marked increase in demand for flights to Mozambique, particularly from businessmen. The cost of a return ticket from Johannesburg to Nelspruit and Maputo with Metavia is R770.

From Nelspruit to Maputo return costs R370. The Komatipoort-Maputo flight costs R190, with the return trip free.

Metavia also operates charter flights to other destinations in Mozambique.

Ross Air has four turbo-prop aircraft and leases seven more, including some jets. It operates an evacuation service for the sick as well as supplying food and medicine to remote areas.

The medical evacuation

service is often asked on to take patients from outlying areas in Mozambique to hospitals in SA. Hospital services in Mozambique are so rudimentary, says a tour operator, that "you wouldn't want to go to Maputo hospital with anything worse than a cut finger".

Ross Air managing director Joyce Bosch says the company employs nine full-time pilots, and has started sending charter flights to Madagascar.

"We are sometimes called on to fly groups to the Indian Ocean islands. We operate as far north as Pemba and Nampula in Mozambique."

Firing

Ross Air has a base in Beira and flies groups from abroad to Mozambique. The cost of a charter flight from Johannesburg to Beira return for eight is about R15 000.

Neither airline's aircraft have been attacked over Mozambique.

The only two airports with traffic control are Beira and Maputo.

Mrs Bosch says: "We apply in advance for clearance at

remote airstrips. The pilots receive their altitude and time parameters, so air travel is safe. We fly at altitudes far above the firing range of bandits."

Several tour groups operate in conjunction with air charter companies to Mozambique and other destinations in the Indian Ocean.

Turbo Air Charter operates on behalf of Action Adventure Tours to Mozambique, Madagascar and other islands. Fly-in Safaris and Falcon Air, based at Lanseria, near Johannesburg, operate charter flights to the Mozambique islands for tourists, as well as to other destinations in Africa.