



Air delays can be managed through some useful tips

Synopsis of article:

- 1) Create your own cushion. Don't schedule flights with close connections or arrivals shortly before big events, meetings or cruise-ship sailings.
- 2) Watch the weather. If storms are brewing, consider leaving a day early once airlines relax penalties on changing flights because of bad weather.
- 3) Try to fly early in the day. Thunderstorms often build with afternoon heat.
- 4) Don't pack crucial items like medicines or valuables in your luggage. You may not see it for a few days, or more. And make sure your name and address is inside the bag as well as outside.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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Fliers Face a Brutal Summer
April 17, 2007; Page D1

Fliers sick of the delays and cancellations that have characterized travel this winter won't get much of a reprieve as the weather warms: Summer travel is likely to be even more of a hassle.

The winter woes, with travelers sometimes stuck on planes for hours or stranded at airports for days, exposed a serious shortcoming of today's leaner network airlines: When bad weather hits, they have less capacity to recover. That will likely mean more problems this summer when storms force slowdowns and cancellations.

Adding to pressure this summer, air carriers have scheduled 3.5% more flights in June, July and August, compared with the same months last year, according to Back Aviation Solutions. Some airports, including New York's Kennedy, are facing bigger traffic

increases than that. The congestion means more flights get disrupted in bad weather, and it takes longer to recover from storms.

"It's going to be a brutal summer of delays," says John Prater, president of the Air Line Pilots Association, the largest pilots union. "If this doesn't look like the summer of 2000 all over again, I don't know what does."

In 2000, booming air travel jammed airports and airways, the "highways in the sky" that jets follow, causing widespread flight delays. Labor battles at carriers like UAL Corp.'s United Airlines added to gridlock.

This year, travel is booming again, airline staffing is tight and labor battles are brewing at carriers. Cancellations and delays are up so far this year. In March, the number of flights canceled was up 67% from a year earlier to 17,204, according to FlightStats.com. Worried about leaving passengers stranded, some airlines are now more-aggressively canceling flights.

In addition, flights have been running fuller this year, leaving fewer empty seats to rebook customers left stranded. In winter storms on busy weekends, some travelers have waited two and three days for flights.

The storms that hit the Northeast this past weekend illuminated the strains in the system. FlightStats counted 807 flight cancellations at New York's three main airports on Sunday, about 21% of all scheduled flights. Travelers at New York's La Guardia Airport, where fewer than half the flights flew on-time, were left sleeping on their luggage. Monday morning, with the storm still pounding the Northeast and flooding closing roads and even some smaller airports, delays averaged about two hours as airlines struggled to catch up and catch a break in the weather.

Travel has rebounded faster than airline hiring. In January, for example, passenger traffic at the five biggest airlines -- American, United, Delta, Continental and Northwest -- was up 1.2% from 2005, but employment at those airlines was down 2.9%, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

Kiosks in airport lobbies let airlines operate with fewer employees at airports. But that means less help on hand when flights are canceled and people need to rebook. Internet reservations save money with fewer employees taking reservations by phone. But that can mean longer waits on hold for callers when disruptions happen. Airlines also save millions of dollars by reducing the number of spare pilots in reserve to fill in when crews get sick, delayed or stranded, and by having fewer spare airplanes to replace mechanically grounded aircraft or planes off schedule because of storms. That reduces their ability to replace canceled flights.

"The carriers do not have capacity to catch up quickly," said David Castelveter, spokesman for the Air Transport Association, the airlines' trade group. "They can no longer afford to have a large number of multimillion-dollar airplanes sitting around waiting for storms and a lot of employees on reserve waiting."

Airlines still bring in workers on overtime when storms hit, Mr. Castelveter said, but long lines and long delays are inevitable in today's travel system. That's why airlines are pushing Congress to speed up modernization of the nation's air-traffic control system, he noted.

Susan Nevius and her husband flew into Miami from Tampa last month just as storms moved in. Her connecting flight to St. Kitts was canceled, and American Airlines told her it would be three days before the couple could get to that island. So much for a St. Patrick's Day weekend Caribbean escape.

The couple, who had arranged for a relative to fly to Tampa from Texas to care for an elderly parent, ended up renting a car to drive back home to Tampa, then waited two weeks for luggage to be delivered. They are still hoping for some refund. "They used to handle this better," Ms. Nevius said. "It's even worse because everyone you deal with is just so nasty."

American says it schedules employees according to predicted load factors so that it has more baggage handlers on hand for days with more baggage and more agents at airport counters to handle larger crowds. The carrier historically added more flights in the summer, but to improve efficiency, it won't add as many this year, a spokesman says.

A few airlines are adding staff and equipment in advance of the summer crowds. US Airways, under pressure because of travel troubles related to a computer snafu and lack of staff and equipment in Philadelphia, said it has a big push on to hire 1,400 airport agents in the next 90 days, and will have one more spare aircraft this summer than last year.

The Federal Aviation Administration says its early analysis of summer flight schedules shows airlines are stretching out their operations, adding flights late at night or in early morning hours. "We are poised to handle any increase in demand," said Mike Sammartino, the FAA's director of system operations.

The agency that runs air-traffic control says it plans to increase use this summer of technology that helps spread out the flow of airplanes when storms hit. The "Airspace Flow Program" was tried last year with some success, and this year the FAA's command center in Herndon, Va., will use it more frequently to reroute planes rather than simply leave them sitting on the ground waiting to take off.

Another move that may help summer travel: Additional departure routes that jets follow have been opened in the Chicago area, helping traffic flow at a busy hub, Mr. Sammartino said. "There's no silver bullet, but additional tweaking helps us," he said.

The good news for summer travel is that summer storms usually don't last as long as snow and ice storms, so not as many flights are disrupted during summer weather events. The bad news is that thunderstorms are harder to predict -- when and where they pop up can have a huge impact on flights. If a thunderstorm moves over one of the arrival or departure routes to an airport, or builds so tall that it forces rerouting airplanes at cruising altitudes, it can have a major impact.