

OPINION

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Travel Doesn't Always Go as Planned: Lessons From a Night at O'Hare

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Sheldon H. Jacobson, Ph.D.

Things don't always go as planned when we head to the airport. Air travelers can face many unexpected issues that may upend their flights leading to delays or cancellations, including severe weather, safety issues, worker shortages or airline staff policies. What's worse, as hiccups occur that delay flight schedules, subsequent flights are more likely to be impacted — especially the last few flights of the day. Last year, nearly 1.4 million flights experienced arrival delays and more than 180,000 were canceled, according to [the Department of Transportation](#).

For some travelers, this may mean a longer-than-expected layover enjoyed at an airport bar; for others, this can mean confusion and frustration as their flight time pushes later in the day with little clarity from airline staff. Some travelers end up stranded without anywhere else to go.

As a data scientist who has studied aviation and policies to improve it for decades, I'm familiar with many of the reasons we face these headaches as travelers. Unfortunately, knowing the cracks in the system doesn't prevent them from impacting my own travel: What started out as an ordinary travel day recently ended up as an overnight adventure at an airport.

Returning from a business trip in Canada, my flight arrived at Chicago O'Hare with ample time to make my connection. Around one hour before our scheduled departure, dark clouds began to move in from the west. Shortly after that, rain began pouring, accompanied by strong winds and lightning.

The flight information board flashed with delays and cancellations caused by a rolling wave of ground stops that ebbed and flowed with each bolt of lightning across the sky.

In spite of such looming threats, my flight remained stubbornly intact and on-time. Then a [ground stop](#) hit the airport that prevented my inbound plane from reaching its intended gate. Around one hour later, it was taxied in, pushing our scheduled departure time out by around 30 minutes.

More creeping delays ensued while waiting for our flight crew to arrive from another flight. When they finally arrived at our gate, I asked if they were in danger of “timing out,” given the [Federal Aviation Administration rules](#) that dictate how much time they could remain on duty every 24 hours. They assured me that they were in good shape in this regard. No one wants a tired pilot and first officer in the cockpit.

They remained steadfastly optimistic.

After boarding our flight, a new wave of storms battered the airport area, as well as my destination airport. Around four hours after our scheduled departure time, we were asked to deplane, with the flight rescheduled for around 6:30 a.m., six hours in the future. The gate agent announced that we were mostly on our own (airlines do not provide any compensation in the form of lodging or food vouchers for events out of their control, such as weather). They provided a telephone number that we could call to get help with any accommodations.

Less than 30 minutes later, the flight was officially canceled, forcing us to scramble for the next available flight, which left in about 12 hours.

With no hotel rooms available anywhere near the airport, overnighting at O’Hare became the only option.

So, what is it like to camp out at O’Hare overnight, and what are some lessons learned?

First, there are lots of seats available. Unfortunately, they almost all have unmovable armrests. This is wise planning by the airport, so people do not lie down across these seats while waiting for their flight. This also means that lying down is mostly limited to floors.

There are a handful of armless benches located just after entering the concourse from the security checkpoints, where people often put their shoes back on after security screening. Those provide one place to stretch out. They are also in a noisy and exposed area.

Second, I asked the gate supervisor if the airline had portable cots available for such situations. They said that they stopped doing that with the pandemic. Well, with [air traffic volume returning to pre-pandemic levels](#), it is time to rethink that policy.

Third, once you leave the secure side of the airport that requires you to pass through a security checkpoint, you cannot return until [the checkpoints reopen](#), the earliest of which is 3:15 a.m. So, unless you plan to remain on the landside of the airport, stay in the secure side (the safest choice).

Fourth, after the terminal cleaners do their job, including a noisy Zamboni-like floor sweeper, there is a two-hour window when the airport becomes somewhat placid. It was not totally quiet but sufficiently quiet to get some sleep.

Fifth, the hundreds of passengers stranded from a variety of canceled flights were amazingly calm and accepting of the situation. At no time did I feel threatened nor in any danger. I did keep my carry-on baggage close by, which is prudent.

Even before the sun began to light the morning sky, the airport began to reawaken and return to its normal state of activity. By 6 a.m., thousands of people who had just arrived for their early morning flight or from West Coast red-eyes began to fill the concourse, oblivious to the few hundred people who were forced to overnight at the airport.

Spending a night in an airport is not ideal. I would never do it by choice. Having a more comfortable place to sleep would have been preferred, something that airlines could facilitate. Yet, in spite of the discomfort, it was tolerable.

This was nothing like what [Merhan Karimi Nasseri endured](#) — living in diplomatic limbo at a Paris airport for 18 years — and whose experience inspired the movie [The Terminal](#). It did, however, carry a few tidbits of similarities.

So, the next time you are scheduled for the last flight of the day to your final destination, you may want to pack an inflatable pillow, a light blanket, and some snack food, in the unlikely event that you get stranded overnight. You will be happy that you did so, even if you are not happy that you needed to use them.

Sheldon H. Jacobson, Ph.D., is a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He applies his expertise in data-driven risk-based decision-making to evaluate and inform public policy. He has studied aviation security for over 25 years, providing the technical foundations for risk-

based security that informed the design of the Transportation Security Administration's PreCheck program.