OPINION

Watch Out For These Issues Before Planning Holiday Travel

Published 09/11/23 09:00 AM ET|Updated 25 min ago

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Although summer has not even ended, it is never too early to begin making holiday travel plans. Soon, people will begin thinking about who they will be visiting and on what days. With Christmas falling on a Monday this year, this extends the holiday travel over a long weekend.

Air travel has returned with a vengeance over the past year. The months of June, July and August averaged 2.5 million people screened daily at airport security checkpoints. The peak day occurred on June 30, when 2.884 million people were screened. A day with 3 million passengers screened may occur during the upcoming holiday travel season, placing significant pressure on the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) as they work to get all travelers through the airport security checkpoint and to their final destinations in time for the festivities.

Yet, beyond airport security, many issues remain that continue to challenge the air system and could affect your holiday travel.

Air traffic control

There continues to be a shortage of air traffic controllers, which makes staffing a challenge, particularly in the densely populated Northeast corridor, where hundreds of flights must be managed every hour to ensure safe and efficient travel. Adding to the situation are the number of recent runway near-misses, which remain at disturbingly high levels.

Before people abandon air travel completely, thinking that airplanes are serving as bumper cars, the definition of a runway incursion includes any situation where an airplane is out of position that could lead to an issue, including airplane near-misses or even collisions. With such a broad definition, the majority of such incursions pose little practical risk to airplanes and passengers, with most not classifiable as near-misses. Nonetheless, with such a high number of flights per day, the accumulated risk over time becomes nonnegligible.

The need to revamp the air traffic control system using updated computer systems and artificial intelligence is critical to meet air travel needs and ever-increasing air traffic volume. Such changes are needed not just today but well into the future, as days with 3 million passengers traveling become more commonplace.

Travelers arrive at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, Illinois, on November 22, 2022, ahead of the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. KAMIL KRZACZYNSKI/AFP via Getty Images

Pilots and flight attendants

Pilots at American, United and Delta all reached agreements for new contracts this year. Southwest pilots remain the one group that is still in negotiations.

Flight attendant unions continue to negotiate contracts. American has promised them a contract, but it has yet to be presented. United hasn't reached an agreement with their flight attendants. The threat of these flight attendants walking off during the holidays is extremely low. However, even small groups of them calling in sick can disrupt schedules and make it more challenging for travelers.

Note that a combination of reduced schedules and high demand has placed upward pressure on airfares. This has made airlines exceedingly profitable over the past year. With their new contracts, pilots have already taken advantage of this windfall; flight attendants also want to cash in on such profits.

Weather

Once the calendar hits November, the risk of inclement weather involving snow and ice increases with each passing day. Airports in the Northeast, as well as Chicago and Minneapolis in the Midwest, all become more vulnerable. Southern hubs like Atlanta and Dallas are typically more reliable through the holiday season but can still be hit with unexpected early winter storms.

Hub-and-spoke versus point-to-point routing

The three legacy airlines (American, Delta and United) all use a hub-and-spoke system to manage their flight schedules and give flyers the opportunity to reach nearly every destination in their network with at most one stopover. Southwest, the fourth largest airline by passengers

carried, uses a point-to-point routing system that gives travelers more direct flights, provided they are in a select set of featured cities.

The biggest challenge with point-to-point routing is that when schedules are disrupted, either with mechanical or staffing issues, there is less redundancy built into the system to provide flight alternatives.

The convenience of direct flights is valued by all travelers, where Southwest has an edge on its competition in many cities. Yet, when disruptions occur, the fragility of the system is exposed. The same occurs when weather disrupts hub airports, with all travelers affected.

There is no best routing system. They are just different. Yet, understanding the impact of each gives travelers better information when choosing which airline to purchase their tickets from.

No matter where you travel to and which airline you choose to travel, stuff happens. As "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," planning for the unexpected with ample connection times and knowing alternative flights that could work for you is always a good idea.

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