

10 lessons summer 2022 air travel meltdowns taught us

(Courtesy of Sean Cudahy, The Points Guy)

Labor Day weekend unofficially wrapped up summer travel with [relatively few major flight disruptions](#), but it certainly did not erase a season full of headaches for travelers.

Between Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends this year, the five largest U.S. airlines canceled more than 29,000 flights and saw more than 336,000 flights — over a quarter of those scheduled — get delayed, according to data from [FlightAware](#).

Those figures marked a 37% spike in cancellations and a 28% spike in delays among American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, JetBlue Airways, Southwest Airlines and United Airlines flights this summer compared to the same time span in the pre-pandemic summer of 2019.

The problems often stemmed from a [combination of staffing challenges, weather and air traffic control delays](#) — issues that will not be fixed right away.

There's hope a lighter passenger load during the fall months could see things continue in a positive direction for airlines. However, amid warnings [it could be 2023](#) before things truly improve, there are plenty of lessons to take away from an often rocky summer 2022 travel season and apply to your travel this fall and beyond.

Booking your trip

Lock in good airfare when you see it

There have been [some positive signs recently](#) when it comes to airfare trends, after months of pent-up demand and high fuel costs kept prices high for a good portion of 2022.

Even as there are more deals to be had this fall, though, truly good prices on flights are difficult enough to find that when you see one, it's worth either putting a fare lock or hold on it or purchasing it right away. [This goes for the holidays](#) — Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's — in particular.

Morning flights are your best bet

Throughout the summer, [TPG has reported](#) — and much of our team has experienced — how early morning flights tend to lead to more pleasant flying experiences.

It's the one time of the day airlines are dealing with a truly clean slate, with the overnight hours giving carriers at least some opportunity to do a bit of a "reset" after a long day of unexpected twists.

As you think about travel in future summer seasons, keep in mind that those pesky summer thunderstorms happen less often in the morning, too.

Consider getting to your destination a day early

Many airlines are flying thinner schedules right now in hopes of having to cancel fewer flights as a result of staffing shortages, and to be more resilient in the face of staffing challenges when bad weather strikes.

With perhaps a higher risk of your flight getting canceled in 2022 compared to earlier years, though, you might want to think about your itinerary, particularly when flying to a can't-miss event that won't wait for you, such as a wedding, a sporting event or concert or a family holiday dinner.

Padding your travel schedule to arrive a day early could be critical to ensuring a hiccup in your itinerary doesn't derail your entire trip. This could mean leaving for Thanksgiving on Tuesday or flying into town for a Saturday wedding on Friday instead of the morning of the event. (We say this with the caveat that there is a good chance you could save money by flying on a holiday itself, so it's not always an easy decision to make.)

Preparing for travel - Consider alternative flights

You'd hate to spend money booking a backup flight, but it's a rather drastic step some travelers [found themselves taking](#) at the height of this summer's issues. If you're not able to arrive a day early to an event you simply cannot miss, it could be something to consider.

If that's not a step you're interested in taking, you should at least do a little research, say, the day before your trip, to see what other flights there are that might get you to your final destination.

I've found that when things start to unravel because of delays or cancellations, it's helpful if I already know of other nonstop flights — on my airline and other carriers — off the top of my head. If there's no way for you to escape a connection on your trip, think about alternative connecting cities you can propose to airline customer service that will still get you to your destination.

For instance, if you're flying from Omaha, Nebraska, to Dayton, Ohio, on American Airlines through O'Hare International Airport (ORD) but there's a huge snowstorm in Chicago — and the airline keeps giving you alternative flights through Chicago that also are in danger of getting canceled — you might say to the representative, "What about flights through Charlotte or Dallas/Fort Worth?"

They may not always let you change connecting cities, but I've had luck avoiding a weather mess with this tactic before.

It may even work pre-emptively if there's a travel alert in place affecting your itinerary.

Brush up on U.S. Department of Transportation policies

Make sure you know your rights as you travel as outlined by U.S. Department of Transportation policies — a major focus of the department of late, [including with the rollout of a new website](#) that lays out passenger rights.

This includes knowing that you're entitled to a refund if your trip is canceled or significantly delayed and you ultimately choose not to fly. It also means knowing what the airline should reimburse you for hotel stays, food and ground transportation when there's a major disruption that's in the airline's control.

Also, bookmark the [TPG points and miles valuations](#) page so you can do the math to figure out what to choose if the airline [offers you a choice of cash or miles](#) for your trouble.

Monitor airport, TSA websites and social media before heading to the airport

Keep an eye on the social media feed for the airport you're visiting. This can be a good way to clue yourself in on potential challenges you could face along your trip.

Whether it's an early warning that [parking may be limited](#) and you should reserve a spot in advance or some sort of operational issue at the airport, oftentimes these messages will end up on the airport's Twitter or Facebook feed. This goes for major airports both in the U.S. and internationally.

We've also discussed how the [TSA app can help you](#) get an early sense of the type of wait you might encounter at the security checkpoint.

Watch the weather in the Northeast and Florida

If you're flying a route that begins, ends or is entirely along the East Coast, the weather conditions in the Northeast and in Florida are critical.

Because so many airlines have hubs in the New York City area and the Sunshine State, a quick thunderstorm or other weather problem can have a cascading impact on flight operations up and down the East Coast for hours (and in some cases this summer, days) on end.

This could mean you'll run into weather-related delays or cancellations in Charlotte — [even if you haven't seen a drop of rain all day](#) — due to a weather system in New York.

Keep an eye on the conditions not just around your home airport, but in those two critical East Coast regions. This can give you an early sense of what type of travel day it might be.

During your travels - Think long and hard about checking a bag, and consider AirTags

From mountains of luggage in Europe to lost bags during disruptions domestically, the rocky summer for air travel included nightmare scenarios for many travelers when it came to luggage.

Particularly when there are cascading delays and cancellations affecting many flights, the luggage situation can start to be a mess at airports and can lead to your bag getting left behind. This can be especially true when your itinerary changes.

The best way to ensure your bag is with you when you land is to pack everything in a carry-on bag. This does mean you'll have to make sure the contents of your bag are compliant with [TSA 3-1-1 rules](#), that your bag size is compliant with airline carry-on policies and that your ticket allows for a full-sized carry-on.

We've also seen just how [important AirTags can be](#) for locating your bag when it goes missing. At the same time, some travelers have learned the hard way that being able to locate your bag and getting it back can be two very different things, including one passenger who [flew back to Europe](#) a second time to retrieve his family's luggage.

Still, it helps to know where along your journey your bag went missing.

Know your way around your airline's app

On way too many occasions this summer, my airline's app came in handy as I ran into cancellations and delays. I rarely called customer service, though, and I [never stood in one of those insanely long lines](#) to talk with a customer service representative at the airport.

By using the airline's app, you can often rebook yourself on a new flight in a matter of seconds. You may even be able to make multiple changes if the first thing you find isn't ideal (but do book the first thing you find that at least works at a bare minimum level, because even that may quickly disappear).

When there are mass flight disruptions, it may be challenging to find a new flight that's convenient, but the app can save you a lot of time waiting on hold or in line.

You can also use the airline's app to spot early signs of trouble, like when your incoming flight's plane is running into a delay that is likely to affect your flight downstream.

Have a backup lounge or a backup plan

The [overcrowding issues at lounges](#) that began to manifest before the pandemic certainly did not disappear in 2022, and in fact, can be particularly troublesome on days when mass flight disruptions leave many travelers stranded in airports.

For that reason, you could face a wait to get into a lounge during your trip which, depending on the length of your layover or departure time, may make it impossible to wait or generally not worth waiting.

This can mean having to brave the airport concourse with most other travelers for a pre-flight meal or drink. Keep in mind that some credit cards may give you alternative options for lounge access. For instance, cardholders of [The Platinum Card® from American Express](#) can access Centurion Lounges, Priority Pass Lounges and – if they're flying Delta – Delta Sky Lounges.

Like many aspects of travel in 2022, having a backup plan goes a long way.

Bottom line

If there's a silver lining from this summer's many flight disruptions, it's that travelers now know to be equipped with plenty of strategies if things go awry with future trips.

With the possibility it could be 2023 before things truly get back to "normal," know that a bit of advance planning could go a long way toward making your future air travel experiences as pain-free as possible.