

What to do when an airline changes your flight

(Courtesy of Nick Ewen – The Points Guy)

Even when the travel industry isn't dealing with a global pandemic, airline schedule changes are commonplace.

A carrier may decrease the frequency of service to a given destination, or they could adjust flight departure times to optimize aircraft utilization. In some cases, a flight booked several months in advance could undergo multiple changes.

And this is even more pronounced today as the world continues to grapple with COVID-19. Airlines sometimes wait until a couple of months or even weeks before a flight to decide whether to operate it. This can be due to demand, equipment changes or any number of other reasons.

For example, recent weather across the country caused Southwest to proactively change, cancel and delay over 45% of its schedule. This wreaked havoc on thousands of weekend vacations, leaving passengers stuck for an extra night.

As a paying passenger, it's critical to understand how to handle a situation like this — so read on for some strategies for dealing with schedule changes.

Before getting into those strategies, however, it's important to address how you can stay informed regarding schedule changes. Unfortunately, this varies significantly — depending on your airline and how far away from departure you are.

In some cases, an airline will send you an email when there's been a change to your itinerary. This could even happen with insignificant adjustments — like a small change to your arrival or a new flight number with the same times. However, some airlines will only send these notifications if you're within a few months of departure. As a result, it's critical to periodically check your itineraries on your own.

Another great tool in your arsenal for schedule changes is ExpertFlyer

(which is owned by TPG's parent company, Red Ventures). While this platform is best-known for its award search capabilities, it also has the ability to alert you when an airline adjusts the schedule of a flight. Simply add your individual flight details and the platform will automatically search up until your departure for any changes.

A final way to stay informed of schedule changes is manual: regularly checking your flights. You don't need to do this every day or even every week. However, it does make sense to log in to your frequent flyer accounts every few weeks to peek at your upcoming trips. The earlier you can identify a change to your itinerary, the easier it is to deal with it.

Deciding on a plan

Once you become aware of a schedule change, the next thing to do is figure out a plan for dealing with it. Generally, this could take three different forms:

Do nothing: In some cases, the schedule change isn't significant enough to warrant any action on your part — like my above example with Iberia. You're still planning to take the flight, even with the change. Some airlines might require you to acknowledge and accept the change, while on others, you may simply be confirmed on the new flight.

Get a refund: In other instances, the change may be significant enough where you no longer want to take the flight at all, and there's no alternative itinerary that works with your schedule. Here, you'd pursue getting a refund.

Find a different routing: Finally, a significant schedule change may be an opportunity to be rebooked on a different set of flights — which can be one of the best ways to make the most of these changes.

The initial one is simple enough: You simply accept the change and plan to take your new flight(s). However, the other two are a bit more nuanced, so let's take some time to unpack them.

Getting a full refund

If an airline cancels your flight or makes a significant schedule change, you're entitled to a full refund.

If there's been a significant schedule change to your itinerary and you no longer want to take your flight, you're entitled to a refund. Unfortunately, during the coronavirus pandemic, there have been a lot of instances of airlines refusing to issue refunds. In fact, monthly data from the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) showed refunds and other ticket issues as the primary cause of DOT complaints during the height of the outbreak.

However, the DOT came down firmly on the side of the consumer, clarifying that if an airline cancels your flight (or makes a significant adjustment to the schedule), you are entitled to a full refund back to your original form of payment. While some airlines continued to buck this rule, many others fell in line.

That said, most airlines have specific thresholds for what counts as a "significant" schedule change — generally when your departure, arrival or connection times change by somewhere between one and two hours, or if you're rebooked from a nonstop flight to a connecting itinerary. We have a guide on these specific policies for all the major U.S. airlines.

If you notice that your trip has been hit with a major schedule change, research the individual airline's policy to see if it counts as "significant" enough for a refund. Then, you can call to cancel the itinerary or do so online (with some airlines). Just be crystal clear with the phone agent, or read the terms of the online cancellation very closely. Canceling and getting a certificate may be much less appealing than getting a full refund (e.g., money back to your credit card) — unless you're offered an added bonus for accepting a flight credit.

Finding an alternate (better) flight

Other times, the schedule change may be significant, but you still want to take the trip — just not on the new itinerary. Maybe your flight is now leaving three hours earlier and you can't get off work to catch it. Or maybe the airline has cut your connection time down from two hours to 38 minutes. Even if it's still a "legal" connection (within the airport's Minimum Connection Time, or MCT), you may not be comfortable with it.

In this case, you may suddenly find yourself in the driver's seat, as most airlines will work hard to accommodate you on a new routing — even if it's one that's more expensive than your original ticket.

For example, I had an American Airlines flight home from New Mexico in 2019 that included a connection in Chicago-O'Hare (ORD) on my way back to Florida. This routing wasn't the most convenient, but it was the only Web Special award option at the time. When the schedule changed on the itinerary, however, I was able to change to flights through Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) — which meant less travel time and an earlier arrival back home. The new routing wasn't available at the price I paid, but the airline was able to make the switch because of the schedule change.

What if you're booked on a partner airline?

If you used your points or miles to book on a partner airline, the situation may be a bit more complicated.

Things get a bit trickier if you use miles from one program for award flights operated by a different, partner airline. If you book far enough in advance, you'll likely experience at least one schedule change prior to departure. And if that change is significant, you might struggle to get rebooked.

If this happens far in advance of your flight (as in, a week or more), you should start with the airline through which you booked, even though the flights are being operated by a different carrier. Ideally, that airline is able to reaccommodate you — either on one of its own flights or on a different itinerary that has saver-level awards available.

However, this gets much more complicated when your desired routing isn't open for awards. In this case, your best bet is to ask the booking airline to work with its alliance liaison at the partner airline to try to "force" availability. And if that fails, have a fall-back plan.

I faced this exact situation back in the fall of 2018. I had redeemed United MileagePlus miles for a one-way, business-class flight from Ljubljana, Slovenia (LJU) to Miami (MIA) via Vienna (VIE). The initial leg was operated by Adria Airways — prior to it ceasing operations — and the long-haul segment was operated by Austrian Airlines.

Five months before departure, Austrian shifted to a seasonal Vienna–Miami flight, so we were rebooked on the following:

Adria Airways from Ljubljana to Vienna (same as before)

Austrian Airways from Vienna to Munich (MUC)

Lufthansa from Munich to Miami

This new routing involved an early-morning flight from Vienna and a short connection in Munich, so it was less than ideal. A much better option would've been the nonstop flight on Adria Airways from Ljubljana to Munich, giving us an overnight at the Munich Airport (and a chance to visit the between-terminals Christmas market) — but there were no award seats on that flight.

After multiple phone calls to United and pleas for them to work with Adria Airways, we got nowhere. Eventually, I figured out that we could take a shuttle bus from Ljubljana to Trieste, Italy — and then fly

from Trieste (TRS) to Munich and then onto Miami the next day. Since the Lufthansa flight from TRS-MUC did have award availability, United was able to easily make that change.

Ultimately, really push the airline through which you booked to get you a routing that works, even if it's a partner airline that made the change — but also have a last resort in case all else fails.

Bottom line

Booking a new trip is exciting, as it gives you something to look forward to — and this is something we can all use right now. Unfortunately, just because you reserve a flight in advance doesn't mean it's going to operate on that exact schedule. And this has never been more true than what we saw during the global pandemic.

Fortunately, there are important things to do if you fall victim to a significant schedule change. By staying informed and carefully considering all of your options, you may be able to turn a messed-up itinerary into a much better routing — or even a full refund.