

Perfect storm: Omicron and weather lead to more cancellations; How long will it last?

(Courtesy of Clint Henderson, The Points Guy, originally published 1/8/2022)

Staffing shortages, winter storms and the spread of the super contagious omicron variant of COVID-19 has made a mess of airline schedules for weeks now.

“We’re in unprecedented times and I’ve never seen anything like this in my 20-something year career,” said John E. DiScala, the founder and editor-in-chief of [Johnny Jet](#).

That sentiment was familiar to all the industry insiders I spoke with. Tim Jue, a San Francisco-based reporter covering airlines and travel, said, “I cannot remember a time when the airline industry as a whole faced such a staffing crisis where there just are not enough people around to do the work. This cuts across every airline, every hub airport in America, and many roles above and below the wing. No carrier has been unscathed by this latest chapter of the pandemic.”

Alaska became the latest carrier to announce it was [proactively cutting 10% of its flights for January](#) in an attempt to restore regular operations. JetBlue which cut another 14 flights Saturday had previously announced similar measures.

According to flight tracking company [Flight Aware](#), Alaska has canceled 17% of its scheduled flights. Horizon cut 2% of its flights Saturday. Skywest scrapped 8% of its flights. Skywest and Horizon operate flights for Alaska.

Across the major carriers, Southwest canceled 318 flights (or 10% of its schedule), United cut 7% or 149 flights and American Airlines slashed 4% of its flights. Delta Air Lines only canceled 10 flights on Saturday according to [Flight Aware](#).

Still, it’s an improvement over Friday when airlines canceled more than 2,600 flights as a [snowstorm hit the Northeast](#). New York and Boston saw the highest numbers of canceled flights on Friday.

Unfortunately, it’s not likely to get better anytime soon. Already, there are more than 630 cancellations for Sunday including 221 from Southwest and another 163 from United.

“I suspect things will continue to get worse before they get better, said Jue, “The country is not at the peak of this major surge yet, and I think we’re going to see more cancellations in the days and weeks to come as infections keep climbing.”

Brian Sumers told TPG, “Because of illness, airlines are so short-staffed they cannot possibly fulfill the schedules they sold to the public. The question of how this cancellation wave will end might be better posed to an epidemiologist. Airlines can get back to normal — or near-normal — when society gets there.”

Henry Harteveldt, a travel industry analyst and president of Atmosphere Research, told TPG, “We have never seen cancellations of this magnitude occur for as long as we are seeing now.”

Harteveldt added, “What’s noteworthy is that these cancellations aren’t isolated to a particular airline or airport. Bad weather can affect multiple airlines, but COVID-19 is causing staffing shortages at nearly every airline. Unfortunately, no one knows for certain when COVID-related cancellations will end.”

Brian Sumers, editor-at-large for the travel site Skift told me, “I have not seen a sustained industry-wide meltdown like we have watched in the past three weeks. But why would it? This is a once-in-a-century pandemic.”

DiScala said, “I think it’s gonna continue like this through the end of the month but once omicron runs through everybody and the winter weather starts moving out things will get better. I have friends who are pilots that had omicron a week or so ago and are already back at work.”

I asked Harteveltdt how the airlines had done during the holidays.

He said, “Airlines are trying to do the best job they possibly can. I give airlines that were able to pre-cancel flights during the past two and half weeks credit for doing so ... airlines have done the best they can to cope with a situation that isn’t just fluid but chaotic.”

Sumers is hopeful, however:

“To be sure, I don’t think this will be the status quo for all of 2022. Things should improve soon. The December holidays are one of the busiest travel periods of the year. January is generally not as busy. It certainly isn’t this year, with many business travelers staying home. When demand is soft, airlines can have operational problems and still get passengers where they need to go.”

Jue said, “It may be rough-going right now for air travel, but I think we’ll be in better shape once we start to see COVID numbers in the U.S. go down.”

Sumers did warn readers that the “next big test for airlines likely will be around Easter, when leisure travelers again take to the skies, en masse. Let’s hope the COVID-19 situation is better by then. If not, we could be in for a similar situation.”