

THE NEW ROAD RULES

Looking for ways to take the pain out of business travel? Here's how to get suite deals, navigate the friendly skies, and avoid those dreaded delays.





Unprecedented changes in the U.S. economy will undoubtedly mean unprecedented changes in business travel this year. But there are two ways of looking at this challenge.

You've heard the bad news: Airlines are parking planes in the desert. Some small towns are losing all commercial airline service. There are new fees for checked baggage and other "à la carte" items. There is tremendous volatility in fuel prices.

But there's good news, too: Fewer planes could mean better on-time performance. Weaker demand in long-overpriced cities like New York could mean lower hotel prices.

In times of uncertainty, it's more essential than ever to get out of the office for face time with clients and colleagues to keep business on an even keel. However, it is just as important to be choosy when deciding which travel expenses will offer the best return on your investment in the months ahead. Here's some advice to help road warriors make the most astute decisions.

SHRINKING AIR SERVICE

The Air Transport Association says that nearly 100 cities will lose all air service over the next year as airlines retrench. Crowded flights will likely remain that way, with many major airlines reducing the number of seats available by 10% or more this fall.

Airports losing all commercial flights serve mostly small towns. Travelers can still get to these cities, but they'll first have to determine which airports nearby offer the lowest fares, then rent a car and drive an hour or two to their destination.

According to Best Western's business travel blog (www.youmustbetrippin.com), the following are some examples of airports losing flights along with nearby airport alternatives: Athens, Ga., (Atlanta or Greenville, S.C.); Hagerstown, Md. (Baltimore or Washington-Dulles); Hot Springs, Ark. (Little Rock, Ark); Lancaster, Pa. (Harrisburg or Philadelphia); Laughlin, Nev./Bullhead City, Ariz. (Las Vegas); Plattsburgh or Saranac, N.Y. (Albany, Syracuse, N.Y., or Burlington, Vt.); Santa Fe (Albuquerque); Trenton, N.J. (Newark).

TRAVEL TIP: Don't worry—in nearly all cases, you can still "get there from here." Most cities losing all commercial flights due to cuts in airline capacity are easily reached by rental car from a nearby airport.

SHIFT INTO GEAR

Reductions in airline service this fall are primarily occurring at airports in small towns rather than at major metropolitan airports, where demand remains strong. With fewer seats (or in some cases, no seats) flying into smaller airports, prices are rising. Corporate travel belt-tightening due to heightened concerns about the economy will mean that an increasing number of business travelers are likely to fly into a major airport, rent a car, and then drive to their appointments in smaller towns that are no longer accessible by plane.

TRAVEL TIP: If you'll be renting cars more often as a result of the cuts in airline service, be sure to take advantage of special frequent-rental programs that reward your loyalty with discounts instead of more airline frequent-flyer miles. For example, Thrifty's free Blue Chip Express Rental Program offers members a free rental day for any size car for every 16 paid rental days. In addition, Blue Chip members receive 50% off the cost of upgrading to larger or more luxurious cars such as the Chrysler 300 sedan or the Sebring convertible. Along with discounts, Thrifty offers a guarantee that if at any time you find the Blue

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THE CHINA CONNECTION

Several U.S. airlines that were recently granted rights to fly nonstop from the U.S. to China are postponing plans to crank up the service due to rising fuel costs and economic concerns. In recent months American, Continental, Delta, and Northwest have asked the Department of Transportation to postpone or reduce frequencies on new U.S.-to-China nonstops despite years of campaigning for access to the lucrative Chinese market.

TRAVEL TIP: If you've got China in your business travel sights, consider flying Korean Air (a SkyTeam partner), which flies from more cities in the U.S. to more cities in China than any other airline via a quick and easy connection at its efficient hub at the award-winning Seoul-Incheon airport. Nearly all flights from the U.S. offer angled lie-flat sleeper seats in business class and a state-of-the-art audio/video on-demand entertainment system (www.koreanair.com).

GREAT CONNECTIONS

Korean Air flies nonstop to Seoul from 12 North American gateways:

- Atlanta
- Dallas
- Las Vegas
- New York
- Seattle
- Vancouver
- Chicago
- Honolulu
- Los Angeles
- San Francisco
- Toronto
- Washington, D.C.

From Seoul, you can connect to major Chinese cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, in addition to Dalian, Changsha, Guangzhou (Canton), Jinan, Kunming, Macau, Qingdao, Sanya, Shenyang, Shenzhen, Tianjin, Urumqi, Weihai, Wuhan, Xiamen, Xian, Yanji, and Yantai. Korean Air also offers nonstop flights from Los Angeles (LAX) to São Paulo, Brazil, South America's largest city.

A LA CARTE PRICING

In addition to fare increases, airlines are imposing (and enforcing) a variety of new "a la carte" fees that can drive up the cost of air travel. This means that business travelers must now look beyond fares and prepare for additional fees for items such as: excess/overweight/oversize luggage, advance or "premium" coach seat assignments, changing/canceling flights, in-flight food/beverages/entertainment, and curbside check-in.

ADVICE: In most cases, elite-level members of frequent-flyer programs and those on full-fare, first-, or business-class tickets are exempt from many such

fees. Consider a higher-priced ticket that exempts you from fees if you plan on adding several extras. (For example, the cost of checking two bags round-trip on United Airlines adds up to a whopping \$130 for a non-elite passenger flying on a discounted ticket.) Also, weigh your bags before departing for the airport or consider shipping them ahead of time.

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Despite murkiness on the economic front, the hotel business is expected to enjoy yet another good year in 2008. With a string of profitable years under their belts, hotels are busy building, renovating, and developing completely new brands to meet the needs of a changing clientele.

ADVICE: Since many hotels typically stay open during room renovations, completing the projects floor by floor, always ask for a renovated room when you check in. —Chris McGinnis

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