

Zagat Air Travel Survey Shows Travelers Frustrated, Industry in a Tailspin

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Ratings and Reviews Worst Since Survey Began in 1990; Mid-size and International Carriers Fare Best With Traveling Public; Continental Best Among Disappointing Major U.S. Carriers, JetBlue Up and Coming

Zagat Survey, the world's leading provider of consumer survey-based travel and leisure content, today released the results of its 2005 survey of airlines and airports. Zagat surveyed 5,277 regular travelers and travel professionals about their air travel experiences during the past year. The bottom line: near universal disappointment.

The ratings and reviews, available in full at www.zagat.com, cover 22 domestic and 55 international carriers, rating them on issues such as Service ("No smiles"), Comfort ("Moo"), Food ("What food?") and Web Site (the only positive result). The findings, the worst for the sector since Zagat began surveying it back in 1990, point to an industry in steep decline, and a clientele whose discontent is palpable (e.g. "It's too bad you can't fly the websites"). Overall, Zagat surveyors reported that the major U.S. airlines, facing high fuel costs, aging fleets and difficult labor relations are "nickel and diming" passengers to make ends meet. (See the executive summary for a list of comments our lawyers won't let us print.)

"The major U.S. carriers are in trouble and not just financially," said Tim Zagat, co-founder and CEO of Zagat Survey. "Their relations with customers are so poor, they're fortunate that passengers have few other places to turn -- only JetBlue seems to be satisfying customers and even its ratings dipped slightly."

U.S. Majors a Mess: Hardest hit were some of America's biggest airlines: American, Delta, United and USAirways all saw their overall ratings drop by at least 30% since the last survey was conducted in 2001. In fact, the only major carrier to make its way into the top ten was Continental, which now ranks ninth among domestic carriers. By comparison, mid-sized carriers such as Midwest Airlines, JetBlue and Frontier topped the list. And rounding out the top five were Song (scheduled to fold next May) and Independence Air - airlines that did not even exist when the study was last conducted.

Internationals Better: As usual, international carriers fare better than domestic airlines since longer flights usually mean larger airplanes and the likelihood of food service. However, even the international carriers have lost ground. Only the three highest rated international airlines, Singapore Airlines ("The Secretariat of airlines"), Emirates Air (No. 2 overall), and Cathay Pacific Airways ("flying as it should be") have ratings of 20 (i.e. Very Good) or above on Zagat's 30-point scale. U.S.-based carriers that fly overseas were rated and reviewed separately for their domestic and international operations. Still, these U.S. carriers rank far behind their foreign competitors with the top three carriers, Continental, United and American, ranking twenty-second, thirty-seventh and thirty-eighth respectively. Among the U.S. airlines, only Continental went up in its ranking (from 27th place to 22nd).

A Few Positives: One area where domestic carriers do outshine their international counterparts is with their websites - where 55% of surveyors say they book their flights. Embarrassingly, the average score of all domestic airlines' websites exceed the average rating of their performance in the air. Six domestic carriers have out-webbed the number one foreign carrier (Virgin Atlantic). As another point of positive differentiation, the major domestic carriers appear to offer popular frequent flyer programs. The order of preference is as follows: American, United, Continental, Delta and Southwest. And by a 2:1 ratio, frequent flyer program participants prefer to use their miles for free flights instead of seat upgrades.

Major Gripes: Not surprisingly, the area where airlines' fared the worst in the survey was the Food category - American and Northwest scored feeble sixes (out of a possible thirty), USAirways a paltry five and United a seven. By comparison, Hooters ("no it's not a joke") earned a not quite mouthwatering fourteen, JetBlue a twelve and Midwest gained top marks with a seventeen. And when it comes to the point of it all -- actually traveling -- 42% of surveyors cite "delays, cancellations and waiting," 21% "cramped seating and crowding" and 13% "poor service" as the number one irritant. Only 2% cite "bad or no food" as their number one complaint - probably a sign that fliers have given up any expectation of finding decent food in the air.

Airports: As for airports, New York's JFK scored a dubious double whammy as both the worst domestic and international airport. Commenting on the nation's airports, Mr. Zagat said: "Domestic airports seem to be designed with minimal consideration for the traveler. If Disneyworld can move its customers around on trolleys, why can't the airlines?"

About Zagat Survey, LLC

Zagat Survey is the world's leading provider of consumer survey-based leisure content. With more than 250,000 surveyors, Zagat Survey rates and reviews restaurants, hotels, nightlife, movies, music, golf, shopping and a range of other entertainment categories. Zagat content is available in print, on the Web, on the Palm and Pocket PC operating systems, on mobile phones, and on TV. For more information, visit zagat.com.

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