

Carilli's five step program to air-travel sanity

Chris Carilli
June 24, 2008

Here we go again. 'Sorry for the bad news folks, but due to weather in the DC area, we have a gate hold for two hours.' Everybody off the plane. Two hours later, everybody on the plane. Taxi to a distant corner of the airport. Engines off. 'Sorry for more bad news folks, but we've been given a wheels-up time of one hour from now.' Some 6 hours later, I arrive at IAD (the airport design that forgot to factor-in human beings), at midnight, some 3 hours late. Unfortunately, this is becoming the norm.

Granted, airplane travel is still miraculous to me. Get in a metal tube, go half way to orbit, and a few hours later, find yourself in a new, and often, unusual place. Unnatural. Unfortunately, airplane travel has also become the most unpleasant form of travel. Welcome to 1890 and steerage class.

As someone who travels too much, and hates it, I've started a list of rules that might save you some heart-ache. The list is sequential in decreasing importance.

1. Necessary -- Travel only when absolutely necessary. Sure, '90% of success is just showing up,' as Woody Allen says, but not at the expense of one's sanity, and the environment. Reduce your carbon footprint. Retain your health. Increase your efficiency and productivity. STAY HOME.
2. Morning -- leave early in the morning. As early as you can stomach. Weather deteriorates during the day. Traffic backs up across the network. Delays are much more common for afternoon than morning flights. Travel in the morning, and save yourself major headaches.
3. Non-stop -- take non-stop flights if at all possible. The anxiety level, and probability of delays, or worse, increases exponentially with the number of connections. Unfortunately, sometimes (3) conflicts with (2), in which case, make the choice that best fits your schedule.
4. Baggage -- never check bags. Flexibility is priceless. Consider the following, all to frequent, scenario: You arrive at the airport in the morning, to go to an afternoon meeting in LA, and check your bag. You get to the gate, and find out the plane is broken. You wait 4 hours, after which time you board, get to LA, and your meeting is long over. Wasted. If you had your bag, you could have turned around and gone home. I've done it, and the airlines allow it. Likewise for getting on earlier connections -- can't do it if you are tied to a checked bag. Caveat: always get as far as possible as soon as possible. If you are at the gate, and there is an earlier flight available, take it.
5. Maximize ground segments. I'd argue that, for any segment that entails under a 4 hour drive, drive it, or, better yet, take the train.

Airports: Following is a table of major US airport hub cities, versus month of the year. In each case, I rank the airport by a red light (avoid at all costs), yellow light (avoid if possible), and green light (OK to go). The table is based on standard weather patterns, principally winter snow storms, and summer thunderstorms. Again, thunderstorms become less of a problem if you can travel in the morning.

	Atlanta	Chicago	Cincinnati	Dallas	Denver	Houston	Los Angeles	New York	Salt Lake
January	🟢	🔴	🟡	🟢	🔴	🟢	🟢	🔴	🔴
February	🟢	🔴	🟡	🟢	🔴	🟢	🟢	🔴	🔴
March	🟢	🟡	🟢	🟢	🟡	🟢	🟢	🟡	🟡
April	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢
May	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢
June	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢
July	🟡	🟡	🟡	🟡	🔴	🟡	🟡	🟡	🟡
August	🟡	🔴	🔴	🔴	🔴	🔴	🟡	🟡	🔴
September	🟡	🔴	🟡	🔴	🔴	🔴	🟢	🟡	🔴
October	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟡	🟢	🟡	🟢	🟢	🟢
November	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢
December	🟢	🔴	🟢	🟢	🔴	🟢	🟢	🟡	🟡

Overall, Chicago and Denver bring up the rear, in terms of weather related delays. If you travel through these cities in winter, make sure you allow for up to an extra week of travel time.

Atlanta and LA are the least troublesome connecting cities (although LAX remains one of the worst airports on the planet, for other reasons, along with Heathrow, Kennedy, and Bombay). I've not factored fog into the weather pattern, since San Francisco is the only airport that I can think of where fog is a consistent problem, and it is not a major US hub.

In terms of time of year, clearly late summer is a risk, wherever you go, due to monsoon related thunderstorms. If you must travel during these months, then I recommend strongly using early morning flights. Usually smooth sailing before 12:00 or so. Then the pot boils.