

# The New York Times

ON THE ROAD

## More Delay and Frustration, and All at a Higher Fare

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Published: March 25, 2008

OF the eight trips I have booked or taken in the last two months, two were scuttled, either by a missed connection or by an interminable delay that made the journey pointless.



Chris Gash

Last week, I waited for hours in a departure lounge in the dreary Terminal A at Newark Liberty International Airport for a delayed [AirTran](#) flight to Atlanta, and for hours more the next afternoon in Atlanta for the delayed return flight home. The total time I invested for a mere three-hour meeting: 31 hours. The cost was about \$800, including airfare, hotel and parking.

Last year was, as we know, the worst ever for flight delays.

There is no hard data yet for this year, but every [business traveler](#) I know says the situation has gotten worse. And the peak business and leisure travel time of the year is only now starting.

Fares, meanwhile, are rising, it seems, by the week. Since January, major airlines have adopted six across-the-board increases in domestic ticket prices, according to Rick Seaney, chief executive of [FareCompare.com](#). He predicts that the incremental increases will continue.

With oil prices soaring, the airlines say they are barely managing to keep their heads above water, even with the higher fares and fuel surcharges. For business travelers, this is already shaping up as one tough year.

For one thing, the domestic system already has almost no slack to handle disruptions of any sort. Most major airlines, meanwhile, are busily reducing domestic seating and flights — sidelining smaller, less fuel-efficient aircraft and diverting the bigger planes to international routes where there still is ample money to be made.

Last week, Edward H. Bastian, the president and chief financial officer of [Delta Air Lines](#), gave an informative presentation at the [JPMorgan](#) Aviation and Transportation Conference in New York.

Mr. Bastian outlined Delta's aggressive plan to expand internationally while shrinking domestically. Most other major airlines are doing the same. By the summer, he said, 41 percent of Delta's available seats will be on international routes.

By the second half of this year, Delta's domestic capacity will be "down a full 10 percent over where it was just last year," he said. By this summer, international capacity will be 77 percent higher than it was in the summer of 2005, he added.

"Domestic demand, meanwhile, seems to be holding up — so far. [Ovation Corporate Travel](#), a travel management company, analyzed some of its clients' spending patterns and found that travel and spending were up from December through mid-March of this year, compared with the same period last year."

“A considerable amount” of Delta’s international growth is coming out of the domestic system, he said.

Delta will further reduce its domestic capacity by 5 percent by August, when the airline will have removed from its fleet (by sale, re-leasing or simply parking in storage) 15 to 20 larger aircraft and 20 to 25 smaller regional jets.

Regional jets, I do not need to remind many of you, provide most of the service at small and even some big airports.

Many airports could be facing sharp cutbacks in service, unless those cities happen to provide what Mr. Bastian called “better asset flights.” Those are flights whose passengers are headed to a hub in the United States to make an international connection.

“Domestic capacity is increasingly being pointed toward feeding international destinations,” he said.

By the way, remember that international flights go both to and from the United States. That is, even if international business travel from the United States slows (and Mr. Bastian and others say they see no clear sign of it yet), business travel to the United States from overseas may remain robust.

“Our offshore bookings are growing substantially in terms of euros” compared with the relatively weak dollar, Mr. Bastian noted.

Domestic demand, meanwhile, seems to be holding up — so far. **Ovation Corporate Travel**, a travel management company, analyzed some of its clients’ spending patterns and found that travel and spending were up from December through mid-March of this year, compared with the same period last year.

But Mr. Seaney said that in the last week or so, corporate travel managers and travel agents and some industry stock analysts have been telling him they are now expecting at least some cuts in domestic travel spending this spring.

“I’m surprised it hasn’t occurred yet,” he said. “I keep waiting every week.”