

Travelers face worse times ahead

Fewer flights, old cars and shabby service besiege road warriors

BY STEVE GARMHAUSEN

Every week now, New York business travelers are finding out that they can't fly to yet another city.

As the number of airline service cuts grows over the next couple of months, New York City's connections to some 80 other cities will be severed or curtailed.

What's more, the aggravation caused by canceled or delayed flights, shabby service and shrinking corporate budgets that are squeezing the life out of trips, is likely to continue for some time.

“The fall is going to be very rough for business travelers,” says Michael Steiner, executive vice president with Ovation Travel Group, a New York-based travel management firm.

It used to be that business trips were an enviable perk—a status symbol that reflected an employee's worth to a company as well as a reprieve from the daily grind at the office. These days, the real grind is in traveling.

Executives have little choice but to adjust.

As one veteran road warrior, Robert Bielsky, who owns Manhattan Commercial Realty Co., puts it: “I still have to be where I have to be.”

The following stories detail how three New Yorkers—the president of a large apparel company, a real estate



executive and an entrepreneur of a startup—are coping with the constant pummeling they endure when they're on the road.

SCHEDULING HASSLES

Busy dealmaker sticks with first or business class

Flight reductions have made it tough for time-starved Dawn Robertson to schedule multiple meetings on a business trip and get an evening flight home.

“Before, you could fly into a city, fly out the same day and get a lot of work done,” says Ms. Robertson, the recently named president of Sean John, hip-hop mogul

Ms. Robertson's solution to these trying times of travel: She flies only in first or business class. Price is not an obstacle for the former head of Old Navy.

But even premium seats are being pinched by all the cutbacks.

In August, as Ms. Robertson hurtled through the sky from San Francisco to New York to start her new job, a flight attendant handed her a scrawny meal of cheese, grapes and crackers.

“What we used to get in the back of the plane, we now get in the front of the plane,” she says.

Ms. Robertson has had some success finding alternatives to the big airlines. She has increasingly flown Virgin America, which has newer airplanes, power outlets at every seat—and touch screens that allow passengers to order food and have it delivered to their seats. The downside is that Virgin has a limited number of domestic routes.

She's also given up on shuttle service along the Boston-New York-Philadelphia corridor. “I would have never thought of taking [Amtrak's] Acela before,” Ms. Robertson says. “But it's faster, easier and a lot less stressful.”

SMALL VICTORIES

Savvy broker scores savings on the road

Working the system to get the best prices is Mr. Bielsky's forte. A frequent traveler, the real estate executive signed up for a program that guarantees him a medium-size car from Thrifty Inc., his regular car-rental agency. He is sometimes able to pay less by renting a car for a full week than for the three days he actually uses the vehicle.

When it comes to hotel-room rates, the savvy traveler looks online for the cheapest deals and compares them to the hotels he prefers.

“I then call the corporate office of my [preferred] hotel, explain that I have a track record with them and ask them to knock something off the price,” he says. His approach usually nets a discount or a bigger room or both, he boasts.

Such small victories help to compensate for frustrations beyond his control. In recent months, Mr. Bielsky's car-

Sean Combs' clothing company. “Now it's a challenge to get all the appointments in.”

rental costs have been rising and not just because of high fuel prices.

A recent Ovation Travel Group survey, for example, found that the average cost of renting a car for a day increased by 5% in the second quarter of 2008, compared with a year ago.

Mr. Bielsky has noticed that the cars are also older and have higher mileage than they did in the past. He worries that the high mileage makes breakdowns more likely.

“I'm sitting in a rental car now that has 20,870 miles on it,” he said recently while he was on a business trip in Fort Meyers, Fla. “That's ridiculous.”

TECH SOLUTIONS

Web guru relies on gadgets

For internet entrepreneur Jason Olim, the key to low-stress business travel these days is twofold: He starts with low expectations and maintains an upbeat attitude. On a recent Continental flight from Seattle to New York, Mr. Olim kept his cool when he found himself in a seat with a broken television screen.

Instead of complaining, he simply whipped out his iPod and watched a movie.

“In this age of technology, if you can't insulate yourself from travel, you haven't bought enough technology,” says Mr. Olim, who founded and owns Freshman Fund Inc., a Manhattan-based gift registry for college-savings plans.

The shoestring budget for his year-old startup doesn't allow him to stay in many hotels. In San Francisco, he stays with friends; in Philadelphia, with his parents and high school friends; and in Washington, D.C., with his sister.

Mr. Olim uses his frequent-flier status to board planes early and avoid the stampede. Once he's in his seat, he envelops himself in a cocoon by watching a movie or doing work.

“At some level, I've gotten good at not noticing what goes on around me,” he says.