

## 2011 New Year's Resolution

1. Exercise
2. Get a raise
3. Get organized
4. Volunteer
5. Drink less
6. Go to bed earlier
7. Pay credit card bills on time

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## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

THE MIDDLE SEAT | DECEMBER 30, 2010

# 2010: A Year of Turbulence in Air Travel

*Passenger Traffic Up 3%, Tarmac Waits Down; Fees Account for Two-Thirds of Airlines' Profits*

By SCOTT MCCARTNEY



Getty Images

Sunday's blizzard closed airports in the Northeast.

The year 2010 was supposed to be a time of recovery for airlines and their passengers. Instead, it will be remembered for its disruptions. Blizzards, ash from an

unpronounceable volcano in Iceland and even fiery failures of new engines left millions of passengers stranded throughout the year. As the recent blizzard on the East Coast—with 7,000 canceled flights—showed, our air-travel system can be exceedingly unreliable in an age when technology makes so much of our daily routine dependable.

When passengers were flying, it was a mixed bag. They were beaten down by service cuts, endless fees and airport-security hassles. On the flip side, new rules meant shorter stays in tarmac jail without wholesale flight cancellations. And there were a few surprises in 2010, like a mischievous jetBlue flight attendant.



Scott McCartney looks back at the year in air travel and explains why it was as a turbulent one for passengers, including the recent blizzard that paralyzed the East Coast and the Iceland volcano that grounded planes in Europe earlier in the year.



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Associated Press

A volcano disrupted traffic across Europe.



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Associated Press

Flight attendant Steven Slater made an early exit from his jetBlue flight.

claims. That was up from 10 last year. In all, 726 people died in passenger-flight crashes, up from 609 in 2009, according to Ascend.

Now brace yourselves for 2011: Fliers can expect higher fares with higher oil prices, possible labor disruptions, continued security hassles and perhaps even tighter airline capacity.

Some former frequent fliers say it's all just too much for them. "I haven't been to an airport in 19 months," said Jay Starkman, an Atlanta accountant who speaks and writes on tax issues. He had tickets to fly Dec. 2 to New York but forfeited the fare and drove to avoid, he said, "a strip search and groping." In the past year, he's also driven to Charleston, S.C., Toronto, Reno and Denver. In January, he plans on driving to Baltimore.

Of course, many people are still flying, despite setbacks. Passenger traffic was up 3% for the year through September, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics. But the number of flights was down slightly compared with last year, so planes have been running fuller, making travelers feel even more crowded inside airplanes and escalating the battles for overhead bin space.

Those who do fly also paid more in 2010. The price passengers pay to fly one mile domestically has increased an average of about 10% this year, according to monthly data compiled by the Air Transport Association through October.

That has translated into a profitable year for airlines. Through September, U.S. airlines (excluding small regional carriers) had combined operating profits of \$6.5 billion, up dramatically from a break-even \$30 million in the same period of 2009, according to BTS.

But consider where the profits are coming from: Over that same period, airlines took in \$2.6 billion in baggage fees and \$1.7 billion in cancellation penalties and change fees—with those two fees alone totaling two-thirds of operating profits.

In terms of safety, 2010 was a deadlier year than 2009. There were 19 fatal accidents worldwide involving commercial passenger flights through Monday, according to Ascend Worldwide, a consulting firm that tracks aviation insurance

claims. That was up from 10 last year. In all, 726 people died in passenger-flight crashes, up from 609 in 2009, according to Ascend.

New planes had their share of problems. The long-delayed Boeing 787 (now dubbed by some the 7-Late-7) "Dreamliner" had a series of setbacks, including an electrical fire aboard a test plane. Already three years late, the 200-passenger plane that promises greater cabin comfort will likely be delivered to its first customer, Japan's All Nippon Airlines, sometime in 2011. Boeing doesn't currently have a firm schedule announced.

The Airbus A380 came under scrutiny when a Rolls Royce engine on a Qantas Airways A380 had a fiery failure in November. Qantas grounded six A380s for more than three



The Seattle Times/Associated Press

Fliers endured stricter screening at security checkpoints.



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Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

Fliers also paid to check their bags

airlines is likely.

Meanwhile, ongoing disputes between airlines and online travel agencies—an effort to cut out the middleman—could make buying tickets more complicated: Currently American Airlines has pulled its flights from Orbitz.com, and Expedia.com has shunted American to the side of its screens as a protest.

But there is a bright spot: Maybe, just maybe, passengers will get to fly on Boeing's new Dreamliner.

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weeks.

Overall in the U.S., 80% of domestic and international flights arrived on time in the U.S. through Dec. 26, according to FlightStats.com, a flight-tracking service. That was virtually unchanged from 2009. Delays weren't quite as long—when a flight was late, the average delay was 54 minutes this year compared with 55 in 2009.

And the number of multi-hour waits on uncomfortable airplanes was dramatically lower because of a federal rule enacted in late April that called for heavy fines if airlines keep people aboard planes on the ground for more than three hours without the chance to go back to a terminal. From May through October, only 12 flights had tarmac waits of three hours or more, a dramatic decline from the 546 flights that sat for three hours or more in the same period last year.

But the rules also made carriers quicker to cancel some flights to avoid fines. FlightStats counted 144,472 canceled flights among U.S. airlines through Dec. 26 this year, up from 123,884 in the same period of 2009. That's a hefty 17% increase, and while airlines are quicker to cancel flights because of the tarmac-delay rule, airlines reported that blizzards, including two devastating storms in the Washington, D.C., area back in February, the ash-cloud mess that shut down European skies, a pilots' strike at Spirit Airlines, and maintenance problems early in the year at Delta Air Lines were the primary drivers of higher cancellations in 2010.

Consolidation among U.S. airlines advanced in 2010. The merger of United and Continental airlines closed, though the integration of the two carriers is still ahead for travelers. Southwest Airlines agreed to buy AirTran Airways, expanding the reach of the nation's largest domestic airline into international flying and adding a second type of aircraft to its fleet. And American Airlines finally won approval for a joint venture with British Airways. More consolidation among

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