NEWS

Canceled flights, expensive tickets await travelers this summer. Will they stay home instead?

Hannah Morse
Palm Beach Post

Published 5:00 a.m. ET June 27, 2022

View Comments

Passengers make their way through a security checkpoint at Palm Beach International Airport during last December's holidays. Summer is another busy travel season. Will inflation, airline woes dissuade travelers? *LANNIS WATERS/THE PALM BEACH POST*

We're always working to improve your experience. Let us know what you think.

To celebrate the Fourth of July, Donna C. of Wellington plans to travel with her family to Long Island.

But you won't catch them on a plane to Islip.

"We're driving. We're going to take our time," she said, declining to give her last name. "This is ridiculous. People are getting canceled left and right."

As she stood with family members near the first carousel at baggage claim in Palm Beach International Airport on a recent weekday afternoon, fresh from a stress-free return flight from New York, Donna said she doesn't want to press her luck.

She pointed to agonizing instances of delays and last-minute flight cancellations faced recently by her sisters, saying paying record-high prices for gas is a preferable option.

JetBlue pauses flights: JetBlue nonstop flight between LAX and West Palm Beach to stop temporarily

'Nightmare surprise': Inflation bites Palm Beach County consumers

Gas prices: E15 gas can be sold this summer. What does that mean for your wallet?

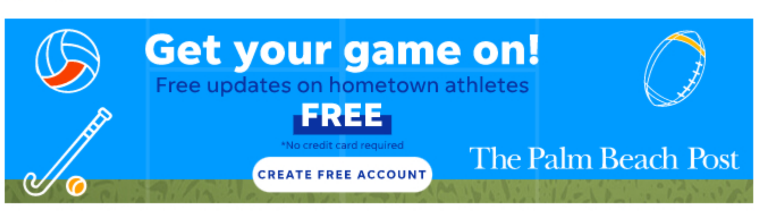
If you're traveling this summer, don't forget to pack your patience.

The chaotic start to the summer travel season over Memorial Day weekend, with thousands of canceled flights across the country, may have been just a glimpse of what travelers may expect in the coming months. A similar scene played out over the Father's Day and Juneteenth weekend, too.

"It's going to be a very highly stressed system," said Robert W. Mann Jr., an airline industry analyst. "The industry already admits that it has barely enough resources to fulfill published and pre-sold flights."

Nonetheless, travel analysts expect Americans to travel in large numbers this summer.

For the upcoming July 4 three-day weekend, AAA predicts 2.6 million Floridians will travel 50 miles or more, a 4% increase over last year's Independence Day holiday.



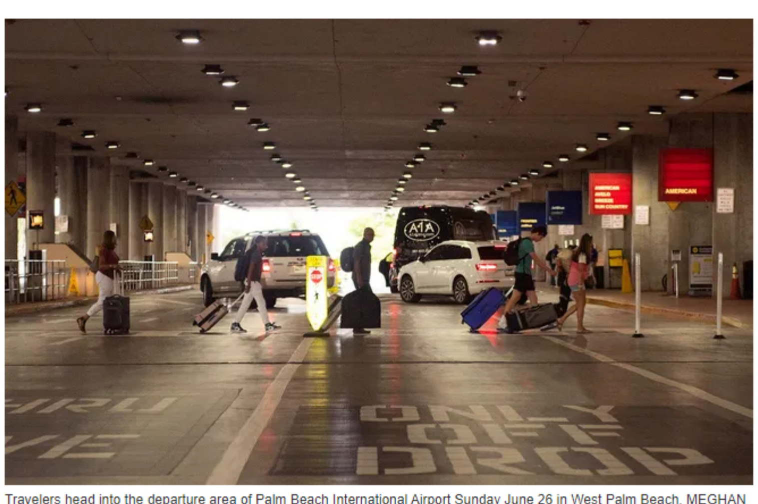
Why so many canceled flights? 'Travel Armageddon' as flight delays, cancellations pile up: What's going on?

Airlines had been paring back flight schedules since spring

For instance, Delta Airlines announced in May it would cut 100 flights between July and August, while JetBlue reduced its summer schedule by at least 10%. The cutbacks created inconveniences, but not as aggravating as the ensuing last-minute flight cancellations due to factors such as staffing shortages and weather.

"Accommodating customers on canceled or delayed flights or missed connections is going to be very difficult," Mann said. "Those empty seats just don't exist."

Plus, the cost to travel has significantly increased, too, as fewer flights in the face of pent-up demand resulted in pricier fares. Airfares in April rose by one-third compared to 2021 and lodging costs are 22.6% more, according to the U.S. Travel Association's Travel Price Index.



Travelers head into the departure area of Palm Beach International Airport Sunday June 26 in West Palm Beach. MEGHAN MCCARTHY/The Palm Beach Post *Meghan McCarthy, MEGHAN MCCARTHY/The Palm Beach P*

These hikes could dissuade tourists from trekking to the Sunshine State, Florida tourism officials say in published reports, and hurt the recovery the state's tourism industry has made since the pandemic business shutdown.

Officials said Florida posted a record 36 million visitors in the first quarter of this year. That figure represented a 14% increase from the last three months of 2021. But those coming this summer, better get ready for potential $5-a-gallon gasoline.

It's not clear what will be the tipping point for Floridians to forego travel this summer, or for out-of-staters to reconsider their trips to the Sunshine State. However, tourism and leisure expenditures are considered non-essential, which is typically the first type of spending to go when there are inflationary pressures.

Consumers worried about inflation might cut leisure, travel spending

In fact, 84% respondents in a poll conducted last month by Florida Atlantic University said the cost of living and inflation were high-priority issues for the country to address, and 79% said they were cutting back on travel and entertainment because of higher prices.

Another barometer of popular sentiment also suggests people might be more conservative with pocketbook spending. Consumer confidence in Florida, which was reaching new heights before the pandemic hit, has been on a downward spiral since last July and is expected to continue sinking closer to 2008 levels, the start of the Great Recession, according to another survey by the University of Florida's Bureau of Economic and Business Research.

"I think this is just really reflective of what's going on in the economy. We have super-high inflation. Interest rates are going to start coming up. It's going to get more expensive to get a loan for a car, for a home or keep a balance on your credit card," said Hector Sandoval, director of the bureau's Economic Analysis Program.

But even if consumer sentiment is low, summer travel isn't expected to completely disappear. Plus, dropping the testing requirement to re-enter the country could leave U.S. travelers with one less worry about getting stuck abroad.

Stranded abroad — with COVID: Adventure turns into nightmare for suburban Boynton Beach couple stranded abroad with COVID

Pain at the pump: Why does Palm Beach County always have the highest gas prices in Florida?

Planning a staycation? Summer guide: Best things to do in Palm Beach County, including free kids activities

Still, one travel industry expert said he has observed signs of slowing in Florida's leisure travel markets in recent weeks. Specifically, Peter Ricci, director of FAU's Hospitality and Tourism Management program, said domestic and international travelers are able to find discounts and blocks of availability in some markets.

FILES - Cars line up at a Shell gas station June 17, 2022, in Miami. President Joe Biden on June 22 will call on Congress to suspend the federal gasoline and diesel taxes for three months. It's a move meant to ease financial pressures at the pump that also reveals the political toxicity of high gas prices in an election year. (AP Photo/Marta Lavandier, File) *Marta Lavandier, AP*

Ricci said those price cuts usually don't happen until the historically slow periods of August and September. He said this points to two realities, one is travelers cutting back on expenses and the other is growing competition from travel markets that have opened up only more recently from pandemic restrictions.

"Consumers are tightening their belts, and one of the first things they cut back on is vacations," Ricci said. "But the other culprit is states and cities that essentially shut down during the pandemic are now wide open again and promoting heavily. Places such as New York, Los Angeles and Chicago are just now experiencing the incredible demand that Florida saw in summer 2020."

South Florida travel centers say they expect to be busy this summer

South Florida airports say they are anticipating pre-pandemic traffic in levels of travelers. At Miami International Airport, for example, passenger traffic over the last 30 days is up 18% compared to the same time frame pre-pandemic.

"Our total flight schedule may decrease slightly this summer, but we expect travel demand to remain high," said airport spokesman Greg Chin.

Palm Beach County is looking at a record year, said Discover The Palm Beaches CEO Jorge Pesquera.

He noted that the tourism marketing arm for the county is "very optimistic about a robust leisure summer travel season," citing a travel sentiment study by Longwoods International that only 6% of travelers are canceling trips because of gas prices.

The study also notes, however, that 82% of travelers said gas prices are impacting their plans in some way. But Pesquera said past experience suggests people will come here anyway.

"History has proven that most travelers will adjust their planned trips rather than cancel their trip, including staying closer to home, reducing the number of trips planned, or reallocating how much they spend on retail, food, accommodations, etc.," Pesquera said.

Sandoval at UF agreed that travelers would rather cut costs somewhere in their trip rather than cancel entirely.

"I think what is happening is people are maybe saying, 'I'm not going to purchase a big-ticket item,' but they're really not postponing their vacation,'" Sandoval said. "People will still come to Florida for holiday vacation, but they won't spend the same amount of money."

Desire to make up for lost 'adventures' in pandemic key factor

While COVID-19 may no longer be top of mind despite infections still occurring, many people "feel like they missed adventures and memories for two years, that we were very afraid of going out that I think perhaps they're willing to cut in other places," said Monica Escaleras, director of FAU's Business and Economics Polling Initiative.

"We're coming out from a pandemic. We were sheltering in place. People place more value now spending time together and trying to also get out of their homes," she said. "I do think people will go ahead and take vacations, but in a shorter version, being cost effective and so forth."

Travelers might opt to go on a staycation nearby or drive if it's more cost-effective for a larger family, Escaleras said.

Airline industry expert Mann said it's good for travelers this summer to have a backup plan, or track their plane's on-time performance with a mobile app. Speaking from his own experience, calling the airline to rebook his delayed flight to New York saved him a day's worth of travel and two layovers when he asked to switch from LaGuardia to JFK.

"If something goes wrong — and the likelihood is that something small will go wrong — just deal with it or have alternatives," he said.

Those deciding to travel said they didn't change airlines or travel dates because of ticket prices.

Michael Kaplan and Ellen Toby were heading back to New Jersey earlier this month at Palm Beach International. Kaplan said he didn't notice any sticker shock with the cost of his ticket, saying "it might have been a little more, but not much."

But none of it really mattered, as they were visiting his elderly parents.

"We were coming no matter what," he said.

Hannah Morse covers consumer issues for The Palm Beach Post. Drop a line at hmorse@pbpost.com, call 561-820-4833 or follow her on Twitter @mannahhorse.

View Comments

© 2022 www.palmbeachpost.com. All rights reserved.

2 free articles left. Create Free Account