

The New Way of Flying Includes a Hefty Rule Book --- Airlines roll out strict protocols for boarding, dining, bathroom use

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(Wall Street Journal) --

A new age of air travel is taking shape.

Airports and airlines are rolling out temperature checks for crew and, increasingly, passengers, as well as thermal scans to spot people with elevated body temperatures. Face masks are now de rigueur for travelers across the U.S. Passengers on Europe's biggest budget carrier must raise their hands to use the toilet.

Forget about the perks of priority boarding at Air France. The carrier is one of several boarding passengers seated at the back of the aircraft first, to limit traffic jams in the aisle. Many airlines are removing in-flight magazines, scrapping meal services on shorter routes, and parking the duty-free cart.

Getting off the plane at the end of the flight could take even longer than usual as airlines try to control the typical crush, with some saying flight attendants will cue small groups when it's their turn to stand up.

As lockdowns loosen, airlines are plotting a path out of hibernation, reformulating routes and services, and balancing safety protocols with the challenge of convincing passengers to board the enclosed space of an aircraft in the midst of a pandemic.

The Trump administration is preparing to begin temperature checks conducted by the Transportation Security Administration at some airports, The Wall Street Journal reported Friday. The TSA said no decision has been made.

Some of the biggest changes airlines envision are the result of what executives expect will be months, maybe years, of lower demand: They see fewer direct flights, for instance, which means more dreaded stopovers.

Some airlines are considering requiring passengers to sign health certifications, or to eventually carry "immunity passports" -- documentation that a passenger has had, and recovered from, the virus.

All of this presents a threat to practices that helped drive a record-long streak of airline profits in the U.S.

Carriers boosted revenue by squeezing more people into coach in recent years -- shrinking seats and space between rows. They charged for more room and for extras that were once free, like choosing seats in advance. Fees for flight changes and checked bags brought in billions of dollars each year.

Now carriers are being encouraged to keep seats empty, making it harder to turn a profit on each flight. At the same time, the corporate customers willing to pay high fares for seats in premium cabins could be slow to return as long as international travel restrictions remain, and may stay grounded longer if video conferencing becomes the norm.

For now, airlines have suspended flight change fees and may have a hard time reinstating them as they seek to restore confidence and keep sick people from flying.

"It's going to be socially less acceptable for someone to get on an airplane who clearly isn't well," JetBlue Airways Corp. Chief Executive Robin Hayes says. "Airlines have to figure out how they're going to respond to that in a way that still allows them to be profitable, but also recognize that you don't want people on the airplane that are ill."

Temperature checks

Air France has rolled out mandatory temperature checks before each departure, with passengers showing a temperature above 38 degrees Celsius, or about 100 degrees Fahrenheit, prevented from boarding. So far, no passenger has been denied boarding as a result, according to an airline spokesman. Carrier KLM in the Netherlands is requiring passengers from areas designated high-risk by the European Union to fill out a health declaration. The areas include major airports in 20 U.S. states.

The airport in Canberra, Australia's capital, is already using thermal cameras to take the temperature of passengers as they pass through security. London's Heathrow Airport plans to test thermal imaging to screen arrivals at one of its terminals for fever.

Korean Air has started scanning passengers for high temperatures flying out of Seoul. Air Canada takes passenger temperatures with a no-contact infrared thermometer; and Frontier Airlines plans to do the same at boarding.

Some critics say temperature checks could give passengers false confidence, as they won't identify infected people who are not symptomatic. European air-safety regulators aren't expected to embrace temperature checks. A draft document of the European Union Aviation Safety Agency's recommendations circulated to national authorities, according to industry and government officials, indicates such checks aren't effective in delaying or mitigating the Covid-19 contagion.

Bathroom rules

Low cost Ryanair Holdings PLC, Europe's biggest carrier by passengers, has done away with lines for the toilets. Passengers are now required to raise their hand to request permission from a cabin crew member before using them.

U.S. carriers are beginning to require passengers to wear masks for the entirety of their flights, but it's not clear how such a policy can be enforced. Some airlines said they're advising flight attendants to de-escalate difficult situations if passengers refuse to wear masks.

The CEO of Frontier Airlines, based in Denver, said "if someone is uncompliant, we will eventually divert an airplane."

One of the biggest challenges revolves around the viability of social distancing at airports and onboard aircraft. Many industry executives say it isn't feasible. There's little agreement on standards. Industry leaders are insisting on consistency around the world so passengers aren't confused.

"It's impossible to socially distance in an airport," says John Holland-Kaye, chief executive of London Heathrow Airport. The hub is in the process of rolling out Plexiglas screens at check-in desks, encouraging the use of face masks, and deploying more automation to limit the interaction between staff and passengers.

Mr. Holland-Kaye is working with his counterparts at airports in Los Angeles, Hong Kong and Sydney to implement standardized procedures. "If we wait until some global organization has agreed it for 172 countries, it'll never happen," he said.

Middle seats

Some carriers have promised to keep the middle seat open, to preserve some sense of social distancing aboard. That hasn't been too onerous, since there are so few fliers these days.

Executives say that's not viable for the long haul. They question its effectiveness, and say carriers can't afford the cost of leaving those seats empty. Air New Zealand Ltd., the country's flag carrier, said that to comply with social distancing, just under 50% of seats on a turboprop and only 65% of seats on an A320 narrowbody can be filled. Flights need to be 77% full on average for airlines to break even, according to the International Air Transport Association, which estimates that fares would have to climb 50% to offset the cost of leaving so much empty space on an A320.

With airlines having cut down on the frequency of flights, some planes have started filling up.

United Airlines Holdings Inc. earlier this month said it would start giving passengers advance notice if they're scheduled to fly on a full flight, allowing them to make other plans. The airline shifted its policy after images on social media of a packed flight earlier this month sparked outrage.

Rep. Peter DeFazio (D. Ore.), chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee wrote to major U.S. airline trade groups last week, urging them to do more to space passengers out. Airline executives say they can't keep that up forever.

"I would hope that we don't have unnecessary regulations," Southwest Airlines Co. Chief Executive Gary Kelly says. "It's really not a viable intermediate or long-term solution to cap a flight at 60%."

For now, however, Southwest is limiting the number of seats it will fill on any given flight. When it sees bookings start to approach that threshold -- something that has started to happen several times a week for some routes -- it will add another flight if there's enough demand to cover operating costs like fuel, Mr. Kelly said. "We at least want the revenue," he said.

Earlier this month, Frontier Airlines, thought it hit on a solution. Chief Executive Barry Biffle says he believes keeping middle seats empty does little for safety if passengers wear masks. To give passengers peace of mind, though, while not forcing the airline to operate money-losing flights, the airline created a new offering: for a \$39 fee, a passenger could ensure being seated next to an empty middle seat.

Lawmakers wrote to Frontier to object. Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D., Minn.) suggested federal guidelines might be necessary to ensure distancing on planes during a subcommittee hearing, broadcast online. Nick Calio, chief of Airlines for America, an airline lobbying group, protested that a rule wouldn't be necessary.

"Hopefully the market will take care of that," he said.

"Well, it didn't with Frontier," Ms. Klobuchar responded. That evening, Frontier rescinded its plan.

The carrier isn't the only one that has encouraged passengers to spend more to secure their peace of mind. Ryanair last week asked passengers to purchase fast-track access through airport security and priority boarding to help avoid crowding.

In China, where domestic flights have resumed in significant numbers, aviation authorities haven't publicly announced social-distancing measures. Most airports and airlines require passengers to wear masks, and to have their temperature checked. Some airlines, including China Southern Airlines Co., are preventing passengers from sitting next to one another.

Demand in China lags far behind capacity, despite airlines offering discounts of up to 90% on many routes. China's civil aviation authority said last week that passenger numbers in April were down 69% from a year ago at 16.7 million. A five-day holiday at the start of May provided a boost, but not the dramatic spike in travel demand that usually characterizes China's national vacations.

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Airlines have started cleaning planes more thoroughly and more often, using equipment to mist cabins with disinfectant and wiping down all surfaces between every flight, not just when jets are parked overnight.

Delta Air Lines Inc. has started building in extra time between flights for cleaning, and says it plans to keep the procedures in place indefinitely.

"We'll take delays if we have to," said Bill Lentsch, Delta's chief customer experience officer.

Long layovers

Analysts at airline data firm OAG estimated that with new cleaning procedures, carriers might need to leave two hours for connections, up from 45 minutes for domestic flights and 90 for international connections.

Another big change: where you can fly. Widebody planes that flew lucrative long haul international routes are being parked in droves, many permanently. Delta said it will retire its 18 Boeing 777 jets, which it used to launch ambitious global routes like Los Angeles to Sydney, this year.

Last year, global airlines competed to offer flights so long they tested human endurance, like Qantas's experiments with direct service from New York and London to Sydney -- a 19-hour journey. Now Project Sunrise, as the effort was dubbed, is on indefinite hold.

U.S. airlines like Delta, United and American Airlines Group Inc. had assembled global networks, securing lucrative airport slots and signing joint venture deals with global partners. Executives now believe international travel will be some of the last to recover.

American has slashed international flying for the summer and has delayed the launch of new international routes it planned for this year. Flights from Philadelphia to Casablanca, Morocco, Chicago to Krakow, Poland, and Seattle to Bangalore, India, are being pushed back to 2021.

"We're not going to be flying the same airplanes to the same places that we flew in the past," American Chief Executive Doug Parker told pilots during a town hall earlier this month.