



ON BOARD

WITH PETER VLITAS

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FLYING IN WINTER WEATHER

Cold weather disruptions are a real pain and it's a major annoyance when you have unexpected delays after a full day of meetings. In winter months, when making your plane reservations, you must factor in the weather. On days you may have to deal with weather issues, you want to avoid taking the first or last flight out because they have highest probability of being canceled. When you have to travel for business in the winter, consider a few of my insider secrets before you decide on your itinerary.

The Aircraft You Want to Fly in Winter

Some people may not realize how important selecting the right aircraft is in your decision-making when booking flights. If you're flying from a major airport to a small town, the chances of a regional jet or prop plane taking off in heavy weather is slim. The big jets will take off deeper into a weather event, while the smaller aircraft will either be parked or repositioned to an area with sunny skies. If you have a trip coming up and you're watching bad weather roll in, you will have better chance of flying if you're booked on one of the larger planes: Boeing 747s, 767s, 777s, Airbus 330s, 340s, 350s, and the 380. Or, simply rebook yourself to fly the day before the weather is due to arrive.

Airport Operations

As the seasons change throughout the world, weather plays a critical role in airport operations. When a major hub city has weather issues, it will affect the airline's entire operation. Airlines start to make changes in their operations in anticipation of a weather event 24 to 48 hours in advance. The airlines will notify their Travel Management Company (TMC) partners first when weather starts to affect their flights. They will alert TMCs that waivers are being offered that relax the rules on changing flights—meaning, you don't have to pay the change fee to reschedule a trip. This time advantage that airlines give to TMCs allows them to move their customers immediately when there are still seats available on their route.

The major airlines are likely to shut down their operations quickly when a severe storm is imminent. They want their own employees to be able to get home safely using mass transit. If a city decides to shut down its mass transit systems due to weather emergency, the airline is obligated to allow time for their employees to get home. Another issue with airport closures is that the **airlines don't want to risk anything happening to their expensive planes during extreme weather**. The airline will fly out empty planes to reposition them in a warmer or non-impacted area to wait out the storm. This will help bring the airline's operations back up and running faster than if they'd left those planes on the tarmac overnight. For example, if an airline's planes are in Florida and there's snow in New York, it's easier to plow the runways when there are no planes in the way. Clearing snow around the gates is time consuming. A weather mess is easier to clean up when the planes are elsewhere.

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Long-Haul Comfort

For those business trips that include long-haul flight to Europe or Asia, take the time to consider the aircraft that serves your destination. For maximum productivity when you land, consider the Boeing 787 which allows for more moisture in the cabin. The aircraft is built with a composite material (not metal) so it retains more moisture and your eyes and sinuses don't dry out in-flight.

Usually a major hub city for a certain airline will offer a real variety in the choice of jet you fly. If you're on the east coast and flying to Europe, you'll likely find that the airlines' product offerings are vast. The key is to fly newer, more ergonomic seats that have more space to relax and work. For Business Class passengers, a big consideration is single aisle access so you don't have to jump over the person sleeping next to you. Choose a seat far away from the galley, where there's too much noise and light, and the bathrooms, for obvious reasons.

The A380 is the world's largest passenger plane and can be configured to offer a luxurious First Class Suite or Business Class cabin. The only drawback is that if this huge plane hits an operational snag, hundreds of passengers will have to be rerouted. If it happens to you, call your TMC when you're still on the plane so they can start to rebook you.

Avoid Disaster

At Protravel International, we track the weather 24/7, watching everything from snowstorms to typhoons. We always have the radar up and our Revenue Management team is constantly evaluating weather issues. Once it's apparent that there is a weather event coming to a certain city or region, we send internal alerts to all of our travel advisors. The advisor looks at their list of travelers and makes a decision to proactively contact them and say something like - "You may have a delay, would you want to leave earlier or later?".

We do our best to keep your business trip on track by changing your itinerary so you don't board a flight that may be cancelled due to ice. And we watch out for the seat assignment. If they won't give us a seat assignment for your new flight, we know you won't get on the plane. We can track when a plane goes 'no-op' due to a mechanical issue or a timed-out pilot. Then, we're switching your ticket so you're not waiting in a long line in the terminal. My advice is that if you hear an on-board announcement directing passengers to deplane, call your travel advisor immediately. The race will be on for the few seats remaining on the next flight. Don't wait to deplane to start rebooking! If the worst case scenario hits and bad weather grounds all the planes and causes an airport to shut down, we can usually beat the rush to get you a room in the airport hotel.

PETER VLITAS started with Protravel International in 1998 and has managed corporate and entertainment airline programs, airline industry relationships, contract negotiations and analysis ever since. He oversees the team responsible for revenue management, rates, cost containment and adherence to contractual parameters. He has been working for over 35 years in the travel industry and sits on several airline advisory boards.

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"Insider tip: Your Protravel Agent can easily enroll your company in a soft dollar program with any of the major airlines."