



MISSED CONNECTIONS

A REPORT FROM THE AIR TRANSPORT USERS COUNCIL

Introduction

Passengers often choose to connect between two or more different flights to reach their destination. This may be because there are no direct flights. Or it might be because it is generally cheaper to book connecting flights than a direct flight. Whatever the reason, most connections work out fine; airlines and airports go to great lengths to make sure they do. But with tight schedules it is inevitable that sometimes passengers will miss connections. When they do, it can be frustrating and inconvenient for them. And, sometimes, it can be very costly. Not only might a passenger have to buy a new ticket to carry on with their journey. They might also have to pay for accommodation and meals while they are stuck waiting for the next available flight.

In February 2005, the European Commission brought in new rights for passengers affected by flight disruptions. The new rules under Regulation EC 261/2004 have been good news for passengers because they protect them from being out of pocket following a cancellation or delay to their flight or if they are denied boarding. But they do not generally protect them from expenses that they might incur if they miss their connection.

The AUC has received a number of complaints both from passengers who have been left out of pocket because they have missed a flight connection on a “through” ticket on a “network” carrier, and from passengers who have attempted to make their own “connections” on two completely separately contracted flights.

Through tickets

If a passenger has a through ticket with a network airline, the airline has a contractual obligation to get them to their destination should they miss their connection. But it would not necessarily offer them any assistance during the delay to their journey.

Under an International Air Transport Association (IATA) Resolution, that is binding on member airlines (most network carriers), the “forwarding air carrier” should provide refreshments and hotel accommodation to passengers who miss their connection when connecting from one IATA airline to another.

But the Resolution does not apply if passengers are connecting between two flights of the same airline. Then, it is up to the airline whether it arranges and pays for meals and hotel accommodation. Fortunately, many carriers commit to providing assistance to passengers who miss a connection between two of their flights. But others do not. For example, we know from responses to complaints that KLM does not provide assistance if the delay to the first flight was due to anything that they consider outside their control such as air traffic control or weather. Continental Airlines goes as far as to say so in its conditions of carriage.

A passenger was on a KLM flight from Bucharest to Amsterdam to connect with a KLM service to Birmingham. The first flight was delayed due to bad weather and by the time it arrived in Amsterdam the flight to Birmingham had already departed. The staff at the KLM desk at Schiphol did not offer a meal or hotel accommodation and the passenger spent the night at the airport.

A couple and a small child were returning from Columbus via Newark to Birmingham on Continental Airlines. Their flight from Columbus was delayed, causing them to miss the flight from Newark to Birmingham. They were rebooked onto a flight the following day, but were offered no assistance. They incurred expenses for accommodation, food and transfers, to the value of \$180. The AUC took up the complaint but Continental refused to reimburse the expenses.

“Connecting” tickets bought under separate reservations

A number of passengers make their own “connections” by buying two (or sometimes more) tickets under separate reservations for flights that connect with each other at an intermediate airport. They usually do this because its cheaper than buying a through ticket or because it will cut the journey time.

However, with such connections, each ticket is bought under a separate reservation (and therefore a separate contract) and both carriers have no obligation to refund passengers or put them on another of its flight should passengers miss their connection.

We have received a number of complaints from passengers who have missed such a connection and have had to pay for a new ticket, often at a more expensive, last minute, fare. And they often have also had to buy meals, and maybe a room for the night, if the next flight isn’t till much later or the next day.

A couple were returning from Valencia to their home in Cornwall and booked tickets on two flights - Valencia to Stansted and Stansted to Newquay - under separate reservations. They had seemingly given themselves plenty of time to catch their “connecting flight” - the flight from Valencia was scheduled to arrive at Stansted at 1250pm and the flight from Stansted to Newquay to not leave until 1725pm the same day. However, a 14-hour delay to the first flight meant the couple arrived at Stansted at 2am and missed their flight to Cornwall. They lost their money on the second flight and had to hire a car to drive home through the night at a cost of £150 and a good night’s sleep!

We are concerned that some passengers are not always fully aware of the risks of making their own connections. This appears particularly the case for passengers booking tickets on “point to point” airlines, which do not offer connecting services. But it also happens with passengers who have bought tickets to connect with a flight with a network airline (that might otherwise offer through tickets); for example, from an international to a domestic flight. Passengers also shouldn’t just assume that because their travel agent or tour operator has booked it for them they will be ok.

A group of eighteen people were booked by a tour operator to fly from Edinburgh to Gatwick with British Airways and from Gatwick to Vilnius with Air Baltic. Their flight from Edinburgh to Gatwick was delayed by around an hour causing the group to miss their connection to Vilnius. When they arrived at Gatwick they had to buy another ticket for a flight on a different airline the next day and pay for a night in a hotel. This was because they had separate tickets for Edinburgh to Gatwick and for Gatwick to Vilnius. In addition to missing a day of their holiday, they ended up paying £124 each in total for a new flight and a night in a hotel.

Conclusion

Experience tells us that passengers continue to get caught out by missed connections. That is why we think it is important that we get the message out about what to expect should they be unlucky enough to miss their connection. For passengers who make their own “connections”, our advice is simple;

- If you are tempted to make your own connection with two separate tickets, don’t risk it, however cheaper it might be; or, if you really have no option give yourself plenty of time or even an overnight stay between flights. Otherwise you could end up paying a lot more.

However, advising passengers with through tickets about what they should expect if they miss their connection is less easy. For connections from one IATA airline to another, passengers should expect to be rebooked onto the next available flight and be offered assistance while they wait. For connections between two flights of the same airline, it is hard to know what to expect because airlines generally don’t commit their policies to print.

We have recently surveyed a number of airlines about their policies on missed connections. Most of the airlines we talked to said that they would usually provide assistance to passengers connecting between two of their flights. But they did not include this in their Conditions of Carriage.

We think that airlines should look after their customers throughout the whole of their journey and at all times. If they choose not to then they should at least make it clear what their customer should expect should they cause them to miss a connection between their flights. (They already do for other flights disruptions such as delays and cancellations.)

In the meantime, our advice to passengers is;

- Where you can, check with the airline to find out its policy on missed connections to see if it will provide you with assistance should you miss your connection. A number of European airlines heavily promote their flights in the UK market, with a focus on competitive prices and the convenience of departure from a local airport.

If you are planning to take one of these flights, you might wish to consider the implications for you of a missed connection - particularly if you are only planning a weekend away. You cannot protect yourself entirely from the consequence. But if you have concerns, you might ask the airline or travel agent to book flights that allow more connecting time. And, if it is an important trip, you might like to ask about flight frequencies - to give some idea at least of when the next flight might be, should you miss your connection. Remember that on many routes there are often a number of different airlines, which might offer more frequent connections or longer connecting times.

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