

Barnett on Business Travel: Southwest Air, embroiled with FAA over safety, courting fliers

by *Chris_Barnett*

Spunky Southwest Airlines, the 37-year-old peanut-pushing carrier built on cheap fares and the public relations savvy of bourbon-swigging, chain-smoking former Chief Executive Officer Herb Kelleher, has its first public black eye.

Southwest is in a major squabble with the Federal Aviation Administration over the airworthiness of its airplanes after cracks were discovered in aircraft fuselages a year ago.

The airline grounded 41 planes on March 12 after admitting it missed required inspections of the aircraft, but said the groundings were not due to structural damage. Southwest is also fighting a \$10.2 million civil penalty for continuing to fly 50 of its workhorse 737s after also admitting it missed inspections. The grounded planes are being reinspected.

Recently, cracks were found on the wings of several of its 737s. Southwest has put three staffers on leave and the FAA reportedly reassigned an inspector.

The aircraft groundings - 8 percent of its 520-plane fleet - will likely play havoc with its schedule and possibly even destinations. So beware and check before you book.

But I, for one, feel safe flying Southwest for several reasons. It has never lost a plane. And the only fatality occurred several years ago when an aircraft skidded off the runway at Chicago Midway Airport and hit an automobile, killing an occupant. Actually, I'm more concerned with the diligence of the FAA. As a colleague says, "the FAA inspects paper, not airplanes. They mostly make sure airlines have filed their maintenance paperwork. Their inspectors don't swarm over every airplane in the fleet."

Southwest, has done some tinkering with its first-come, first-board policy without having to switch over to costlier, more cumbersome assigned seating - it hasn't seemed to tick off passengers. You still have the A, B and C lines but now you get a number. I was B-26 on a recent flight. B-25, a San Diego biotech software designer named Theresa Alexander standing in front of me, said "it's less chaotic now and I can usually get an aisle seat, not true with assigned seating."

What's more, Spartan Southwest is still a bargain, usually undercutting fares of its newest rival, Virgin America, which hasn't generated the buzz that discounter Jet Blue did when it came out of the chute.

On a recent weekend flight from San Francisco to San Diego, I snagged a seven-day advance fare of \$166 round-trip on Southwest with all the taxes and fees included. Granted, it was a crack-of-dawn 6:45 departure; however, Virgin America, with its cool entertainment systems and first-class section, wanted \$266 for an economy seat on the same route. (For an upcoming cross-country flight, I'll book Virgin and report back).

Late last year, Southwest debuted a Business Select fare aimed at commercial travelers - it takes some of the chanciness out of getting a good seat. For an extra \$10 to \$30 per flight, Southwest guarantees you are among the first to board in its "A" group. Plus, you receive a free cocktail onboard as well as one to two extra flights on its Rapid Reward frequent flyer program. Book it on the Web site where you can obtain boarding passes 24 hours in advance.

Both of my Southwest flights departed and landed on time. I got an aisle seat, and there was enough legroom that I was able to pull down the tray table and use my laptop computer comfortably. Can't say that for most economy class seats on American, United, Delta or Northwest - space is scant and legroom is usually tight unless you receive an exit row or bulkhead seat.

Flight attendants were cheerful and attentive, more than willing to load you up with salty, caloric peanuts. I passed.

Southwest isn't adding or dropping any new cities on its route, but its code-share with ATA is being pared back, an insider told me. Essentially, ATA is dropping flights from Chicago Midway to Dallas Fort Worth in April. And some Southwest code-shares on ATA flights to and from Honolulu are being scrapped.

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassle.

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