

# Booking Winter Flights Updated

by Chase Binder

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I love to hear from readers, especially when they ask me to re-visit a topic that really hit home. Such is the case with my column on booking winter flights back in 2016. As some of you asked, here is my column on that topic from November 2016—updated with a few changes.

The foliage this year has been swoon-worthy. Indeed, the folks who measure factors like color vibrancy say it's the best in seven years. But make no mistake, winter is coming. Ice. Snow. Bitter cold. All of which can add an almost unbearable level of stress to the no-longer-fun-at-all world of air travel. That's the bad news. The good news is that there are a few things you can do to decrease your chances of encountering a disaster.

Most important, book your itinerary carefully. No matter where you're headed—warmer climes to the south, our own west coast, Europe, even Oceania or South America—the important thing is to get in the air on time. And no matter whether you're flying out of Manchester-Boston Regional Airport (MHT) or Boston's Logan Airport (BOS), this means booking the very first flight of the day possible. Why? The aircraft will already be there—no waiting for an inbound aircraft which has had lots of time to get embroiled in scheduling delays elsewhere. Airlines work hard



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to begin their days on time, so will park the last inbound aircraft of the night right at the gate for the next morning's (hopefully) on-time departure. Equally important, if the first flight has a problem, the airline has all day to fix it and get you on your way.

Book non-stop whenever humanly possible. Airplanes can take off in dodgy weather a lot easier than landing in snow and sleet. Once you're in the air, a nonstop is virtually guaranteed to get you to your destination on time. Given airline consolidations, nonstop options have diminished somewhat. You might have to drive to Boston to catch a nonstop JetBlue flight to the Caribbean. Spirit has non-stops out of Boston to several points in Florida, and Allegiant has non-stops out of Pease to locations on both Florida coasts. Southwest has non-stop to Orlando and Tampa out of MHT. Beware, though, savvy travelers grab non-stop seats early.

**Update: Good news! Frontier Airlines is now operating out of**

**Portsmouth at Pease International Airport (PSM) with nonstop flights at great introductory prices to places like Orlando and Las Vegas. True, Allegiant and Frontier have somewhat restricted schedules—they don't operate these flights every single day. If your schedule is a bit flexible, Allegiant and Frontier are great options—I love those nonstops. On the slightly bad news side, travelers now have to pay for long-term parking... though only \$7/day.**

But sometimes non-stops just won't work. In those cases, look for an itinerary that connects in an airport as far south as possible. If you're flying American, choose Charlotte rather than Philly. Delta will often route you through their hub in Atlanta. I try and avoid United, which often routes through Newark. Think about it—weather systems hit us from the west and big ones can stretch for hundreds of miles. Chances are good that a big storm affecting New Hampshire will be causing havoc all the way down to DC.

No matter where you're connecting, allow lots of extra time to make that connection. Much better to relax at the gate waiting for your onward flight than to miss the connection and risk your entire trip. Speaking of missing an entire trip, if you are headed for a cruise or a tour, build in an extra day or two on the front end. They will leave without you if you're not there on time!

**Update: This year's travel stories have already included lots of "missed connection" scenarios. Most online booking sites will allow you to set minimum connec-**

**tion time as a search criterion. Use it! Set it at 2 hours minimum and you'll have a bit of wiggle room.**

Once you've booked, it's critical to monitor both weather (just turn on your TV) and air traffic as your departure approaches. I always monitor the inbound flight. This is easy to do by searching the airline website for arrivals. Match the airline, gate number and time with your outbound flight and, bingo—you'll be able to find the inbound flight and you'll have advance warning of delays. I use flightaware.com, which often has more accurate and up-to-date info than airline's own website. Another website that has great air traffic info is fly.faa.gov, which will show you which airports are experiencing delays—and even the reason behind the delays... weather, traffic, whatever.

Of course, even if you've done everything possible to protect your travel, things can still go bad—sometimes for weather, sometimes just the bad luck of a mechanical failure or a distant scheduling problem that has a domino effect on your flight. Here is where information is power. If you're one of the first to know, if you have cleverly put the airline's contact info on your cell phone's speed dial, and if you've been smart enough to keep your phone fully charged (always travel with a battery-powered portable charger), you'll be among the first to grab alternate seats.

**Update: Virtually all airlines have their own apps now. Take the time to install the app on your smart phone and have one-tap access to your booking info and options. Speed matters!**

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