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THE MIDDLE SEAT

Midseat Takes a Look Back

Good things often don't last in the airline industry, as Peter M. Lee recently learned.

I thought it might be a good time to update several past Middle Seat columns, and Mr. Lee's experience stood out. He signed up for the fare-change alerts at Yapta.com, a service I wrote about May 22. When two US Airways Group Inc. tickets he bought on July 17 dropped in price by a total of \$256, he called US Airways looking for the \$256



By Scott McCartney

voucher off a future trip. That's what he'd be entitled to under the policy US Airways outlined in the story.

But in mid-July, US Airways quietly changed its policy on vouchers for price changes after you purchase tickets. The carrier now charges a \$100 change fee regardless of whether you want cash or a voucher, and so Mr. Lee was offered only two \$28 vouchers. American, Delta and Continental airlines also charge change fees in these cases; Alaska, JetBlue, Southwest and United airlines all offer vouchers for the full price difference.

US Airways had said it wouldn't charge the change fee on vouchers because it recognized that vouchers, which come with many restrictions that can make them difficult to use, don't have the same value as cash. "The simplest way to adjust for the difference is to waive the change fee," a US Airways spokesman said in May.

Now, US Airways says it regards vouchers as the same as cash. "We are now in line with most of the rest of the industry," a spokesman said.

Yapta says even as airlines tighten up rules on refunds when they cut prices, its service is still useful in tracking price changes before you buy tickets. Yapta President Tom Romary says 78% of all itineraries tracked by Yapta are pre-purchase—people get alerts from Yapta when prices change so they can make better buying decisions.

As for Mr. Lee, who bought his tickets within days of the US Airways policy change, he feels

burned. "I paid more for the airline ticket than I probably otherwise would have with the comfort that I would recoup the difference if and when the price declined," he said.

■ Slight Improvement

August air travel looks like it was only slightly better in terms of on-time performance than June and July, according to early results compiled by FlightStats.com.

Airlines made operational changes during the summer to try to make schedules more reliable, acknowledging that congestion had become chronic. US Airways stretched out its schedule by about 30 minutes, for example, and Northwest Airlines Corp. cut about 4% of its flights because of a shortage of pilots and greatly reduced the number of cancellations.

Overall, changes led to only slight improvement so far. About 74.4% of U.S. flights were on-time, according to FlightStats.com, which compiled August airline performance for this article. (The Department of Transportation's report won't be out for another month.) That's better than both July's 73.9% on-time rate and June's 69.4%, but not by a lot. The August rate this year was worse than last year's August on-time rate of 78.4%.

FlightStats looks at a wider universe of airlines and flights than the DOT's monthly report, including more small airlines as well as international arrivals. The on-time numbers tallied for 40 airlines tend to run a bit higher than the DOT's report because of the inclusion of so many smaller airlines. DOT, measuring domestic flights at 21 airlines, reported 69.8% of airline flights arrived on-time in July and 68.1% in June.

In terms of airports, flights into New York's Kennedy International Airport remain the most-delayed in the country, with only 58.7% arriving on-time.

For June, July and August combined, AMR Corp.'s American had the lowest on-time percentage among major airlines, at only 66.3%, according to FlightStats. JetBlue Airways Corp. wasn't much better, at 67.2%. Southwest Airlines Co. had the

highest on-time percentage for the summer among big airlines—an impressive 79.1%. Among flights that were delayed, the average wait at American was 69 minutes, FlightStats found. At JetBlue, the average delay was 77 minutes.

■ Small Jets

I've written in the past about the potential air-taxi business (May 19, 2004, and March 28, 2006) and the "very light jets" coming into the market (Sept. 30, 2006) that offer more-affordable jet travel for many. Commercial air-taxi service on jets is getting a lot closer to being more widely available to consumers.

In the next couple of weeks, DayJet, a Florida-based company with big ambitions to make less-costly jet trips feasible for business-travelers, says it will begin operations. DayJet says it has signed up 250 corporate accounts for trips on its three-passenger, two-pilot Eclipse 500 jets.

Another company, Linear Air, says it will fly its first "very light jet" air-taxi trip with paying customers in mid-September. Massachusetts-based Linear provides air-taxi service in the Northeast with single-engine turboprops, but is now working the Eclipse 500 twin-engine jet into its fleet.