

ZAGATSURVEY®

2005

U.S. AIRLINES

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ZAGAT SURVEY, LLC
4 Columbus Circle
New York, New York 10019
Tel: 212 977 6000
E-mail: airlines@zagat.com
Web site: www.zagat.com

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The reviews published in this guide are based on public opinion surveys, with numerical ratings reflecting the average scores given by all survey participants who voted on each carrier and text based on direct quotes from, or fair paraphrasings of, participants' comments. Phone numbers, Web sites and other factual information were correct to the best of our knowledge when published in this guide; any subsequent changes may not be reflected.

About This Survey

Here are the results of our latest *Airline Survey*, covering 22 U.S.-based carriers (a separate report contains the results for 55 carriers that fly internationally). As a whole, this *Airline Survey* is based on voting by 5,277 people like you – i.e. members of the flying public. Since participants reported taking an average of approximately 15.2 domestic flights per year, the *Survey* reflects the experiences of passengers aboard a total of some 80,000 flights within the U.S. each year – or viewed another way, about 220 flights per day.

Of the 5,000-plus fliers who participated in this *Survey*, 64% are men, 36% women; the breakdown by age is 10% in their 20s; 28% in their 30s; 22% in their 40s; 23% in their 50s; and 17% in their 60s or older. They reported that 55% of their trips are for leisure, 45% for business. Our editors have done their best to summarize these surveyors' opinions, with their comments shown in quotation marks. Knowing that the quality of this *Survey* is the direct result of the thoughtful voting and commentary of these participants, we sincerely thank each of them.

On the assumption that most people are eager for quick information about the carriers they are considering flying with, we have tried to keep reviews as concise as possible, and we've created a number of "best" lists at the front of this guide. Note that while we include tops lists for both premium and economy classes of service, the scores displayed with each carrier's review are for economy class, since that's where most people fly; obviously, scores were generally higher for premium class.

This marks the 27th year that Zagat Survey has reported on the shared experiences of consumers like you, covering subjects including restaurants, entertaining, golf, hotels, resorts, spas, movies, music, nightlife, shopping, theater, tourist attractions – and airlines. By regularly surveying large numbers of avid, educated customers, we hope to have achieved uniquely current and reliable guides. We hope you agree.

To vote in any of our upcoming *Surveys*, just register at zagat.com. Each participant will receive a free copy of the resulting guide when published. Your comments and even criticisms of this guide are also solicited. There is always room for improvement with your help. Just contact us at airlines@zagat.com.

New York, NY
November 7, 2005


Nina and Tim Zagat

Ratings & Symbols

Name, Toll-Free Phone Number & Web Site

Zagair 800-977-9000; www.zagat.com	Zagat Ratings			
	C	S	F	W
	12	10	4	10

A "fly-by-night operation literally as well as figuratively", this "cheapie" charter might suffice "if Greyhound is all booked up", but given planes "older than Moses", seats "salvaged from sunken subway cars" (complete with "subway straps" to accommodate "standing-room-only crowds" caused by "chronic overbooking") and "stale pretzels" flung by "Jurassic"-era flight attendants, critics conclude "I'd rather take a mule"; P.S. "time to upgrade that Web site."

Review, with surveyors' comments in quotes

Top Airlines: Airlines with the highest overall ratings, popularity and importance are listed in BLOCK CAPITAL LETTERS.

Ratings: Are on a scale of 0 to 30.

C	S	F	W
Comfort	Service	Food	Web Site
12	10	4	10

- 0-9 poor to fair
- 10-15 fair to good
- 16-19 good to very good
- 20-25 very good to excellent
- 26-30 extraordinary to perfection

Ratings shown with reviews are for coach class only.

▽ low response/less reliable

Top Ratings

Top Overall

Premium	Economy
20 Continental Airlines	21 Midwest Airlines
19 Hawaiian Airlines Aloha Airlines	19 JetBlue Airways
17 United Airlines	17 Song
16 American Airlines	16 Frontier Airlines
	15 Independence Air

Top Comfort

Premium	Economy
21 Continental Airlines	24 Midwest Airlines
19 United Airlines Hawaiian Airlines American Airlines	22 JetBlue Airways
18 Spirit Airlines	19 Song
	18 Frontier Airlines
	17 Independence Air

Top Service

Premium	Economy
22 Continental Airlines	23 JetBlue Airways
21 Aloha Airlines Hawaiian Airlines	22 Midwest Airlines
19 Alaska Airlines	20 Frontier Airlines
18 American Airlines	Song
	Independence Air

Top Food

Premium	Economy
18 Aloha Airlines	17 Midwest Airlines
17 Continental Airlines Hawaiian Airlines	14 Song
14 United Airlines	12 JetBlue Airways
13 American Airlines	11 Hawaiian Airlines
	10 Alaska Airlines

Top Web Site

23 JetBlue Airways
21 Southwest Independence Air Continental Airlines American Airlines

U.S. Airlines

AirTran Airways

13 | 14 | 5 | 17

800-247-8726; www.airtran.com

"It's cheap" sums up the main appeal of this "no-frills" outfit serving many Eastern cities (plus some out West) via Atlanta and other gateways; while admirers find it "better than expected", citing "new, clean planes", "courteous employees" and "bargain" business upgrades starting at \$35, critics irked by "delays" and "cramped" "cattle-car" conditions conclude it's "not worth the savings – you'll spend it on Advil."

Alaska Airlines

15 | 17 | 10 | 18

800-252-7522; www.alaskaair.com

Maybe it's "not as good as it once was" (recent "labor troubles" haven't helped), but this Seattle-based carrier is still seen as a "solid choice" for trips "up and down the West Coast", including Canada and Mexico; "cost-effective" fares, "friendly" service and the fact that it "goes places others don't" are all assets, yet to some it's "unmemorable": "the Chevrolet of airlines."

ALOHA AIRLINES

14 | 17 | 10 | 15

800-367-5250; www.alohaairlines.com

Fine for "island-hopping" is the word on this carrier that may have faults ("cramped", "older planes" and a "mad dash" to board open-seating flights), but "hey, you're in Hawaii", "trips are short" and the crew has that "aloha spirit"; some also deem it a "great alternative" for service from the mainland, while others sigh "a five-hour flight on a Boeing 737 is not fun"; N.B. it's been flying under Chapter 11 protection since December 2004.

AMERICAN AIRLINES

14 | 14 | 6 | 21

800-433-7300; www.aa.com

This "giant" (and oneworld member) is still judged "one of the better majors" by remaining loyalists who like its "terrific" mileage program and "useful" Web site (which, embarrassingly, outscores its basic business), but critics irked by "surly to bed, surly to rise" staffers, "no pillows" and "food-less flights" (you're "treated like cattle – but they get fed") claim its "motto should be 'nothing special in the air.'"

America West Airlines

11 | 13 | 6 | 15

800-235-9292; www.americawest.com

All agree it has "great rates", but otherwise voters split on this Arizona-based low-cost carrier; to fans it offers "decent" comfort and service; however, critics counter "they don't call this 'America Worst' for nothing", blasting "delays, cancellations", "major" overbooking, a "clunky" Web site and more; the big question: will the post-Survey "merger with US Airways make any difference"?

ATA Airlines

12 | 12 | 6 | 13

(fka American Trans Air)

800-225-2995; www.ata.com

"Why pay more?" ask pragmatists who say this Indianapolis-based "low-cost" carrier often delivers good "value" and is "no worse than the competition" – its crews can even seem "happy to see customers"; but cutbacks in the wake of its 2004 bankruptcy filing make it "hard to use" for some fliers, and views on comfort range from "roomy" to "only a jockey wouldn't complain about the legroom."

CONTINENTAL AIRLINES

14 | 16 | 10 | 21

800-525-0280; www.continental.com

"As good as the old guard gets", this "reliable" behemoth is one of the few major domestic airlines not currently in bankruptcy; over the last decade, it has turned around its image and now wins praise for its "modern fleet", "convenient" schedules and niceties like "free meals"; this SkyTeam member really soars in premium, rating tops in all categories but Food (where it's No. 2); in sum, management has obviously been "trying hard" and largely succeeding.

Delta Air Lines

12 | 13 | 7 | 18

800-221-1212; www.delta.com

It was once the South's "premier carrier", and though this Atlanta-based SkyTeam member can still be a "class act", especially in premium cabins or on its Northeast shuttles, critics pepper it with potshots: "should hand out cowbells for passengers", "rottweilers snarl less" than some crews, "service? – I didn't notice any"; its Chapter 11 filing is a concern, but some say "bankruptcy may help."

FRONTIER AIRLINES

18 | 20 | 10 | 17

800-432-1359; www.flyfrontier.com

"Comfortable, reliable, convenient and cost-effective" typifies reaction to this "friendly" "no-frills", one-class flier connecting Denver with cities across the mainland (plus Alaska and Mexico); maybe their route system is a bit "limited" and "DIRECTV at each seat" would be even more "terrific" if they didn't "charge for it", but Rockies-bound boosters consider it the "best thing for skiers since snow was invented."

HAWAIIAN AIRLINES

15 | 18 | 11 | 16

800-367-5320; www.hawaiianair.com

"You go up, you go down, you get juice or coffee" – this airline "gets the job done" in a "pleasant", "efficient" manner for "short hops" around the Hawaiian islands and is also a "good choice" to or from the mainland (it flies to the South Pacific too); if a few find seats "tight" and the food "variable", compensations include "newer" planes, "a meal" on longer flights and service that can "match the warm friendliness of the islands."

Hooters Air

▽ 16 | 19 | 14 | 15

888-359-4668; www.hootersair.com

No, it's not "a joke" – the restaurant chain known for its wings spawned an airline; based in Myrtle Beach, it serves a dozen or so cities from three gateways flying single-class planes equipped with leather seats and built-in "scenery", i.e. the Hooters Girls who, ahem, augment the crews; boosters say the "price is right" and "once you get past the tacky part" it's a "fun" ride, while critics hoot "puh-lease!!!"

INDEPENDENCE AIR

17 | 20 | 9 | 21

800-359-3594; www.flyi.com

"A welcome alternative to the big boys" is the take on this relative newcomer operating out of Washington Dulles airport; its routes are concentrated in the East and it flies mostly "small regional jets" (plus some bigger Airbus craft), but supporters find them "quite comfortable" and staffed by "enthusiastic" employees who "actually seem to care" – add in "bargain" fares and most fliers are willing to overlook "delays" and service lapses.

JETBLUE AIRWAYS

22 | 23 | 12 | 23

800-538-2583; www.jetblue.com

Why do surveyors “love” this “model” low-cost carrier? – let us count the reasons: “clean, new” single-class jets, “comfy” “leather seats” with “kick-butt” DIRECTV screens, “blue-chip” snacks, a “clear, concise” Web site and, most of all, the “consumer-focused” service, rated No. 1 in the U.S. economy ranks; quibblers claim it “used to be cheaper” and needs a “better mileage program”, but all in all, “other airlines must be blue with envy.”

MIDWEST AIRLINES

24 | 22 | 17 | 17

(fka Midwest Express)

800-452-2022; www.midwestairlines.com

“Surprisingly luxurious” for a small airline – make that “for any airline” – this Milwaukee-based carrier leads the U.S. economy rankings overall and for Comfort and Food thanks to its “wide” leather seats, “accommodating” service and freebie chocolate-chip cookies (meals are for-purchase only); though some say its newer, lower-fare ‘Saver Service’ flights are “cattle-car” caliber compared to its ‘Signature Service’ planes, most simply “wish they flew to more cities.”

Northwest Airlines

11 | 12 | 6 | 18

800-225-2525; www.nwa.com

This “struggling” major is either “underrated” and “getting better” or deserving of its “Northworst” nickname, bringing out the “Don Rickles” in surveyors who insult everything from “surly, attitudinal” staffers (“better service from the Styx boatman”) to “ancient” aircraft “held together by duct tape” (“did Aeroflot have a salvage sale?”); pluses include a “user-friendly” Web site, “easy upgrades” to “human class” and SkyTeam membership; N.B. at press time, it had just filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

SONG

19 | 20 | 14 | 20

800-359-7664; www.flysong.com

Although this “low-cost child of Delta” will be merged back into its parent brand starting in May 2006, fans who dubbed it the “iPod” of airlines are no doubt hoping that its best features will be retained, i.e. “great entertainment” via seat-back systems, “witty” attendants, “better-than-standard” legroom, “tasty” for-purchase meals and even “freshly shaken” cocktails – a few of those and you’re “definitely singing.”

Southwest

13 | 19 | 5 | 21

800-435-9792; www.southwest.com

Apart from the “boarding stampede” caused by “unreserved seating” – “all that’s missing are cattle prods” – most feel this single-class “no-frills” pioneer “got it right” years ago by being “cheap”, “reliable” and “fun”, with “comedians-in-training” crews, “decent comfort” (at least for “short hauls”), an “easy-to-use” Web site and rewards program, and mostly “on-time service”; still, luxury lovers label it a “flying bus” best left to “proletarians.”

Spirit Airlines

12 | 13 | 5 | 16

800-772-7117; www.spiritair.com

“You can’t drive as cheaply” as you can fly to some cities on this Florida-based carrier serving mostly East Coast and Caribbean destinations, and with luck you’ll encounter “comfortable” “new”

aircraft and “cheerful” crews with, yes, “spirit”; but we also hear reports of “dilapidated old planes”, “delays” and tight-“squeeze” seats, so it may be wise to pack “low expectations” and aim for a “bargain” upgrade to roomier business class.

Sun Country Airlines**▽ 15 | 18 | 13 | 17***800-359-6786; www.suncountry.com*

Twin Citians consider this “very reasonable” Minnesota-based outfit a welcome “alternative” even if it could use “more flights” and some claustrophobes get that familiar “sardine” sensation in coach; that you can “still get a magazine, hot sandwich” and even, in first class, a “pillow and blanket” is another reason why it’s “not a bad little airline.”

Ted**15 | 14 | 6 | 17***800-225-5833; www.flyted.com*

Opinion is mixed on this “low-cost” United spin-off whose moniker and route map are both trunca-ted versions of its parent’s; fans say it’s discount “done well”, with a “cool attitude”, “pleasant” personnel, “good entertainment” and much-appreciated “extra legroom” in ‘economy plus’ sections; but the disappoint-ed say “they’re not fooling anyone” – “it’s United” with “prettier planes” and a “slightly better attitude.”

UNITED AIRLINES**13 | 12 | 7 | 18***800-241-6522; www.united.com*

Its “roomy” ‘economy plus’ seating is arguably “the best thing going in coach travel” and a real “incentive to be a frequent flier” with this “once-mighty” giant that’s fighting to emerge from Chapter 11; other assets include extensive routes, “Star Alliance affiliation” and “fantastic” ‘premium service’ between JFK and California; beyond that, however, critics say it’s “just another” “Jekyll and Hyde” airline – “pleasant” or like a “root canal”, “depending on the crew and aircraft.”

US Airways**11 | 11 | 5 | 15***800-428-4322; www.usairways.com*

“Cut them some slack” say supporters who insist this major (which merged with America West post-*Survey*) “tries hard” and is “not nearly as bad as its rep”; a Star Alliance member, it’s often “the only good option” to some Northeastern cities and can do a “fine job”, especially on “short flights” or the shuttle; still, gripes abound (“cranky” crews, “contortionist” seating, “confusing” Web site) and cynics claim that if it’s “gotten better recently” it’s because it “probably wasn’t possible to get worse.”