

HIGH AND LOW FLYERS

Going away this summer? Our survey reveals the best – and worst – short-haul airlines to book with. Our analysis also shows some no-frills flights don't always offer great value for money

What price enjoyable air travel? A difficult question to answer, but one that many of us have surely pondered from a bolt-upright, vinyl-covered seat, as surly staff go about a dirty plane serving their over-priced food and drink.

No doubt Ryanair – whose satisfaction score of just 43% puts it second from bottom in our survey of 18 major short-haul airlines (see p25) – would say (in its own inimitable way) that passengers put up with this kind of treatment in return for low fares. It's now the world's largest international airline (after just 25 years in business), and there's no doubt that the Irish carrier's cost-cutting approach to air travel works for some.

But when we checked the price of return flights to major European destinations for a family of four with hold luggage, we found that Ryanair wasn't always the cheapest. And where it was, better-rated airlines weren't always far behind.

NO-FRILL FEES

On the popular London to Barcelona route, for example, we found that Easyjet – by far the most flown-with airline in our survey – was significantly cheaper than its no-frills rival Ryanair. Though Easyjet's score of 56% is only just above average, passengers wanting to visit the Catalan capital may be swayed by the fact that its planes land at the city's main airport, rather than at Ryanair's base at Girona – a 57-mile €12 bus ride away.

A flight to Barcelona with British Airways (BA), which has a customer score of 60%, cost just £12 (2%) more than Ryanair.

And even when no-frills airlines such as Ryanair were significantly cheaper –

for example, when flying from Scotland to Dublin – it pays to look beyond the ticket price. Ryanair departs from Glasgow Prestwick, which is 32 miles from Glasgow city centre, while Aer Lingus goes from Glasgow International and Edinburgh airports, which are both closer to major cities.

Of course, the picture changes when you compare airlines' prices for flights with hand baggage only. In these cases, the no-frills carriers come out much cheaper than so-called full service airlines that include 'optional extras', such as checked baggage, in the ticket price.

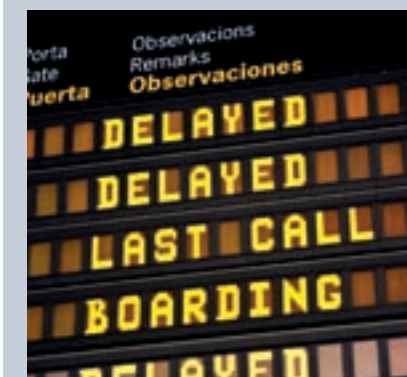
CARD CHARGES

While around half of those in our survey opted to reduce their baggage to cut costs, it's harder to choose not to pay by credit card – particularly as using one may give you protection if the airline goes bust, as several have done in recent years. This means you get hit by the credit (and, in some cases, debit) card handling charges that some airlines add.

Fees for paying by credit card vary greatly between the five most-used scheduled airlines in our survey. Easyjet adds a £3.50 booking fee to the total amount (irrespective of the number of tickets or passengers) and a 2.5% credit card surcharge. Similarly, Jet2.com adds a 3.5% booking fee plus 2.25% surcharge.

Other airlines apply a 'flat fee'. Ryanair's is £5 per passenger per journey (adding £10 per passenger to a round trip). With BA you will have to pay a £4.50 surcharge per ticket (a return counts as one ticket).

With the exception of BA, you'll still have to pay the booking fee if you use a regular debit card. If you want to avoid these fees



FLIGHT RIGHTS

■ **WHO CAN CLAIM?** To claim for flight delays or cancellations you have to have a confirmed reservation, have checked-in in time for your flight, and be flying from an EU airport or from a non-EU airport on an EU airline.

■ **DELAYS** You're entitled to food and refreshments, a way of contacting people to tell them of the hold-up (either two free phone calls, or faxes or emails) and overnight accommodation where necessary.

■ **CANCELLATION** You should be offered either a refund plus a return flight to the point of departure at the earliest opportunity, or re-routing to your final destination. The latter can be at the earliest opportunity or at a later date that's convenient to you. While this is sorted out, you're entitled to the same benefits as if your flight were delayed.

■ **COMPENSATION** You can make a claim if your flight was delayed by more than three hours or cancelled. However, the rules regarding how much you get and when you can claim are complicated – see www.which.co.uk/flightrights for a template letter of complaint and more information.

■ **VOLCANOES** If you're one of the one in 10 Which? members who had their travel plans disrupted by the Icelandic volcano, you were entitled to assistance as with a delay, and should be able to make a claim against the airline and your travel insurance provider – go to www.which.co.uk/volcano for more details about claiming.

■ **STRIKES** Caught by the BA strike? You were entitled to assistance as with a delay, and a refund if your flight was cancelled. You won't be entitled to compensation.

RYANAIR
SCORE 43%
GLASGOW
PRESTWICK TO
DUBLIN
£336

AER LINGUS
SCORE 71%
EDINBURGH TO
DUBLIN
£418

AER LINGUS
SCORE 71%
GLASGOW
INTERNATIONAL
TO DUBLIN
£439

BRITISH AIRWAYS
SCORE 60%
HEATHROW
TO BERLIN
£455

FLYBE
SCORE 62%
BIRMINGHAM
TO PARIS
£409

BRITISH AIRWAYS
SCORE 60%
BIRMINGHAM
TO PARIS
£954

EASYJET
SCORE 56%
LUTON TO
BERLIN
£376

KLM
SCORE 65%
BIRMINGHAM
TO PARIS
£418

BMI BABY
SCORE 47%
EAST MIDLANDS
TO PARIS
£446

EASYJET
SCORE 56%
LUTON TO
BARCELONA
£499

RYANAIR
SCORE 43%
STANSTED TO
BERLIN
£376

BRITISH AIRWAYS
SCORE 60%
HEATHROW TO
BARCELONA
£615

RYANAIR
SCORE 43%
LUTON TO BARCELONA
£603

Prices show cost of cheapest return tickets for a family of four travelling with two pieces of checked baggage and paying by credit card. Prices checked 27 April 2010 for travel dates 20 August (departure), to 23 August (return). Score = customer satisfaction and likelihood to recommend (see p25).

PHOTOGRAPHY BY: ALAMY. ILLUSTRATION BY: OLIVER BURSTON

altogether, you can pay with Visa Electron (Easyjet, Flybe and Jet2.com) and Solo (Jet2.com only). On Ryanair you’ll need a prepaid Mastercard to avoid fees.

HARD TO CREDIT

Credit card surcharges reflect the risks to the retailer involved in that payment method. Naturally, online transactions have a higher risk of fraud, but in the case of airlines, the requirement to produce a passport when using airline tickets should substantially reduce the risk.

The UK Cards Association (UKCA), which represents the cards industry, says that the average card-processing fee should be between 1.5% and 2.5% of the total transaction value, which puts Easyjet and Jet2.com at the upper end of that scale (the others don’t state their fee as a percentage). Debit card payments are lower risk and should be, according to UKCA, a ‘matter of pence’ for businesses with a lot of customers, like airlines. On airlines’ fees, UKCA said: ‘We know that consumers are paying more than just the costs incurred by airlines, but

it’s a competitive market and the law says they can charge whatever they want – as long as they’re upfront about it.’

We’re not convinced that airlines are being that upfront about it. We checked the online booking processes of the 11 most flown-with airlines in our survey and found that most required passengers to click through five or

IN SOME CASES, CARD FEES CAN COST MORE THAN THE FLIGHT ITSELF

six pages of information and options (such as baggage, seat choice and so on) before a total cost inclusive of card fees was displayed. With the exception of Aer Lingus (which adds its £5 per passenger per journey fee three web pages in), all required passenger names before displaying the total. Thomas Cook Airlines – the lowest-ranked in our survey – requires full contact details before disclosing the final total.

WHICH? SAYS

Flying with good-quality airlines, such as Swiss, Aer Lingus and Air Malta, can really make a difference to your holiday. But if you’re going somewhere not served by these airlines then don’t always assume that no-frills carriers will be the cheapest – particularly if you’re travelling with baggage.

However, shopping around for the best deal isn’t made easy by airlines that play a childish and frustrating game with their customers by waiting until the last possible moment to tell you how much it’ll cost to pay with a credit or debit card. In some cases, these fees can cost more than the flight itself. We think that a ‘running total’ showing the price for all payment types could and should be displayed much earlier in the booking process.

OUR RESEARCH

In March 2010, 5,745 members took part in a Which? Connect online survey about their most recent short-haul flight. Results are shown in the table opposite, or to see the results of our long-haul flights survey see www.which.co.uk/airlinesurvey.

AIRLINE SATISFACTION SURVEY										
	CABIN STAFF	CLEANLINESS	ARRANGEMENTS	SEATING	LEG ROOM	CABIN BAGGAGE ALLOWANCE	CHECKED BAGS ALLOWANCE	DEALING WITH DELAYS	VALUE FOR MONEY	SCORE (%)
1 SWISS (55)	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	n/a	★★★★	72
2 AER LINGUS (88)	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	n/a	★★★	71
3 AIR MALTA (69)	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	n/a	★★★	68
4 KLM (71)	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	n/a	★★★	65
5 CYPRUS AIRLINES (30)	★★★★	n/a	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	n/a	★★★	64
6 LUFTHANSA (63)	★★★★	n/a	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	n/a	★★★	64
7 SAS SCANDINAVIAN AIRLINES (53)	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	n/a	★★★	63
8 FLYBE (304)	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★	62
9 TAP AIR PORTUGAL (46)	★★★★	n/a	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	n/a	★★★	62
10 BMI (94)	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	n/a	★★★	60
11 BRITISH AIRWAYS (671)	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	60
12 JET2.COM (151)	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	58
13 EASYJET (1,262)	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★	★★	★★★	★★	★★★	★★★	56
14 BMI BABY (115)	★★★	★★	★★★	★★★	★★	★★★	★★	★★	★★	47
15 THOMSON AIRWAYS (643)	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★ ^a	46
16 MONARCH AIRLINES (364)	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★	★★★	★★	★★★	★★	45
17 RYANAIR (623)	★★	★★	★★	★★	★★	★★	★	★★	★★★	43
18 THOMAS COOK AIRLINES (327)	★★★	★★	★★★	★★★	★	★★★	★★	★★	★★ ^a	37

USING THE TABLE Sample size in brackets. n/a – not enough responses. *Cabin staff* Efficiency and politeness. *Cleanliness* Aircraft interior and toilets. *Seating arrangements* Allocation and boarding. *Customer score* Based on overall satisfaction and likelihood to recommend. ^a Excludes respondents who booked as part of a package



TRAIN-TO-PLANE STRAIN

Comfortable, punctual, and straight to the terminal door – trains really should be the perfect, stress-free way to get to the airport. However, only seven of the 20 busiest airports in the country currently have a mainline station located on-site – four of these are in the south-east.

The ‘postcode lottery’ continues when it comes to what you’ll pay to get there. When we checked fares between the nearest city and these seven airports on a per-mile basis, the cost of a single ‘anytime’ ticket ranged from 17p a mile (Glasgow to Prestwick on First ScotRail) to an astonishing £1.22 a mile on the Heathrow Express between Paddington and Heathrow.

We’ve also found evidence suggesting that, on routes to the three biggest London airports, train companies could be deliberately bumping up fares for customers travelling to airport stations.

We compared the cost of travelling per mile to the station one stop before the airport with the cost of travelling to the airport itself. For example, Victoria to Gatwick on Southern is 44p a mile, but Victoria to nearby Horley is 35p a mile, meaning that airport users pay 20% more. It’s a similar story

on the Stansted Express, where there’s a 24% difference between the 39p per mile you’ll pay from Liverpool Street to Stansted Mountfitchet and the 51p per mile you’ll pay to the airport itself. Overall, that works out as an extra £5.90 – it’d be cheaper to take a taxi from Stansted Mountfitchet to the airport if there are more than two of you.

We asked the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) how train companies can get away with this. A spokesman told us: ‘There’s a whole range of criteria on which fares are based, including the distance of the journey, the frequency of the service and how long the journey takes. Rail services to the airport tend to be faster and more frequent than to stations directly before the airport – a factor which is taken into account when fares are set.’

This may be so, but between Manchester Piccadilly and Manchester Airport, there’s no price-per-mile difference between journeys to the airport and journeys to Heald Green, the station directly before (and where almost every airport train stops). Similarly, on the frequent Glasgow Central to Prestwick Airport service, where every train stops at Troon, the price-per-mile costs to either station are virtually the same.

Rip-off rail

From (city)	To (airport)	Operator	Cost per mile
London	Heathrow	Heathrow Express	£1.22
Southampton	Southampton	South West Trains	68p
London	Gatwick	Gatwick Express	63p
London	Heathrow	Heathrow Connect	54p
London	Stansted	Stansted Express	51p

Fairer fares

From (city)	To (airport)	Operator	Cost per mile
London	Gatwick	Southern	44p
Manchester	Manchester	Northern Rail	39p
Birmingham	Birmingham	Virgin/London Midland	35p
Glasgow	Prestwick	First ScotRail	17p