

America's Most Reliable Airlines

Based on excerpts from an article by Rebecca Ruiz in *Forbes*
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According to our analysis of the nation's 10 major airlines, discount carriers actually rank first in reliability.

Southwest, the no-frills discount carrier, handily beat the competition in most of the categories we judged. JetBlue also considered a discount airline despite its plush leather seats and individual television sets, ranked third just behind Continental Airlines. Fourth place went to AirTran, another budget carrier.

Alaska Airlines, Northwest Airlines, American Airlines, and Delta Air Lines were solidly average performers. United Airlines and US Airways landed at the bottom of the list.

To judge reliability in the airline industry, particularly at a time when carriers are responding to oil prices by slashing capacity and raising prices, we looked at six different factors for 10 major airlines.

We collected five years' worth of data relating to on-time arrival, cancellations, complaints and mishandled baggage from the Aviation Consumer Protection Division of the Department of Transportation. Delays and cancellations, the factors most likely to ruin a flier's day, were given double weight.

To better gauge the overall flying experience, we included J.D. Power and Associates' consumer satisfaction rankings from 2005 to 2008. These surveys reach more than 9,000 travelers annually and ask participants to rate factors like cost and fees, in-flight services and check-in.

When all of these figures were combined, the discount airlines consistently rose to the top. For each of the years we studied, Southwest's flights were punctual more than 80% of the time; the average was 76.8%. Alaska Airlines gave the most dismal performance, with only 74.6% on-time flights.

In terms of canceled flights, Southwest reigns yet again. The carrier canceled an average of 0.65% of its flights over the five-year period, compared with the worst airline, American, which canceled an average of 2.4%.

AirTran, another budget carrier, had the fewest reports of mishandled baggage--a contentious issue now that airlines are charging as much as \$50 to check regular-sized luggage. In 2007, AirTran had about four reports of mishandled baggage per 1,000 customers. The worst-ranking airline, US Airways, had 8.5.