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Consumer Reports

BRAND-NAME RATINGS

Blue jeans

Gas grills

Barbecue sauces

Portable mixers

Claw hammers

Road tests: Mitsubishi Galant,
Mazda 626, Buick Regal,
VW Passat

THE BEST (AND WORST)

AIRLINES



THE BEST (AND WORST) AIRLINES



U.S. airlines are serving far more passengers than ever before. But how well? We rate 14 carriers.

Since the airline industry was deregulated in 1978, air travel has truly become public transportation. U.S. airlines carried more than 423 million domestic passengers last year, a 67 percent increase from 1978. In 1989, 78 percent of American adults had flown at least once in their lives; 10 years earlier, the figure was 65 percent.

But airline passengers today are not only flying more, they're flying in more-crowded airplanes and sitting in more-cramped spaces. They're waiting in more-congested airports, for more delayed flights, and visiting cities they have no desire to go to, simply to change planes. In short, the product they're buying today is a shadow of the product they could have bought 13 years ago.

No wonder that the more than 140,000 CONSUMER REPORTS readers who filled in a section of our 1990 Annual Questionnaire devoted to airline services were overwhelmed by the quality of their flying experiences. Overall, airlines satisfied their customers less than did such frequent gripe targets as car-repair shops, auto insurers, and

hotel chains, all services we have also rated in the recent past.

The airlines that provide the best service, our readers say, are not those offering the most choices of flights or the most-generous perks for frequent fliers. By and large, they are small and medium-sized carriers that have carved out niches for comfort, service, or consistently low prices. Far and away the best of them is Alaska Airlines, which flies mostly in the western U.S. It won top marks for on-time reliability, food quality, seat comfort, and other attributes. America West and South-

west Airlines, two medium-sized, low-price carriers, also scored better than average, particularly on the important factor of on-time reliability. The "megacarriers" that fly the bulk of domestic passengers earned mostly average marks. The only one of them to land in the top five was Delta.

Not surprisingly, the airlines that satisfied their customers least were for the most part carriers that have been in deep financial trouble. They include Continental and Pan Am, which are in bankruptcy but still flying; Hawaiian, which lost a record \$121-million in 1990; TWA, which has said it may seek bankruptcy protection; and Eastern, which stopped flying in January.

Time flies

Our readers' responses covered approximately 250,000 domestic flights taken from January 1989 through May 1990. A crucial factor to our survey respondents was on-time performance. They reported that more than one flight in four was delayed 15 minutes or more. One flight in nine was late by more than an hour.

Top-ranked Alaska had the best on-time record in our survey: 86 percent. Hawaiian, at the bottom of the Ratings, arrived on schedule only 66 percent of the time. But Pan Am, Eastern, USAir, and TWA were just about as tardy, on time for only 67 or 68 percent of their flights in our survey.

Aside from choosing an airline with a good on-time record, you can take other steps to avoid delays. First, try to schedule a nonstop flight; the more take-offs and landings on your journey, the more chances of a delay. Second, try to avoid flying at peak times (7 to 9 A.M. and 4 to 7 P.M. at most U.S. airports).

The U. S. Department of Transportation requires the major carriers to publish up-to-date on-time ratings of each flight listed in a computer reservations system. A rating of 1 means the flight arrived on schedule 10 to 19 percent of the time during the previous month; a 9 (the highest rating) means it was on time at least 90 percent of the time. Your travel agent or an airline reservation clerk can tell you the rating for most flights. If it's less than a 7, find another flight. (Unfortunately, the often-late Hawaiian, as well as commuter airlines linked with the majors, are too small to be required

AIRING THEIR GRIPES

The percentage of our survey respondents who rated the following aspects of their most recent flights as less than good:

Cleanliness of plane	9%
Boarding area	9
Check-in service	10
In-flight service	13
Ventilation/temperature . . .	21
Food quality	37
Seat comfort	49



"Ladies and gentlemen, is there a bankruptcy attorney on board?"

1990, compared with fewer than half in 1970.

Aircraft size can affect comfort. The larger, wide-bodied planes have higher ceilings and two aisles, which make it easier for passengers to move about. Widebodies such as the Airbus 300 and 310, the Boeing 767 and 747, the Lockheed L-1011, and the McDonnell Douglas DC-10, are generally used for non-stop flights of three hours or more. But plane size alone is no guarantee of comfort. Hawaiian

Airlines uses Lockheed L-1011s for its trans-Pacific flights, but it packs 10 seats across in its coach rows, where most airlines fit 9 seats. Our readers noticed; they gave Hawaiian poor marks for seat comfort.

Another variable is "pitch," the spacing between rows of seats. Top-rated Alaska Airlines offers two to three more inches of space between coach rows in its Boeing 737-200 planes than America West, which ranked average for seat comfort.

Choosing the right seat can improve comfort. Aisle seats offer a better opportunity to stretch than center seats or window seats. Bulkhead seats, in the first row of each section, sometimes have extra leg room (but they lack underseat storage space). Seats next to emergency exits may also have more leg room.

But avoid seats immediately in front of emergency exits; they often don't recline.

In general, readers were happy with the service they received aboard their flights. Alaska, which ranked highest in this category, claims it often staffs its flights more fully than do other airlines. Continental received the worst marks for in-flight service.

It's safe to say that the ratio of flight attendants to passengers affects service. Two years ago, airlines experimented with smaller crews, a move that didn't sit well with all passengers. Today, many airlines are adding flight attendants.

The FAA mandates one flight attendant for every 50 seats, regardless of whether those seats are filled. You may get better service by flying at off-peak hours, when fewer seats are filled. But with low-priced, restricted tickets attracting more people to off-peak travel, that strategy doesn't always work.

Gulp! Airline food

Airlines know that food is a low-priority item with passengers. When airlines are financially strapped, it has traditionally been among the first things they trim.

Still, the subject stirs emotions, and our respondents were outspoken. Alaska Airlines, which adver-



First impressions
Our survey respondents who flew first-class were more satisfied than average with in-flight service, seat comfort, and even their food. To fly first-class without paying for a first-class ticket, you may be able to buy an "upgrade," as described on page 468.

to reveal their on-time performance records.)

No way to treat a dog

The U.S. Government sets space standards for airlines transporting dogs and cats. No such rules apply to human cargo. Thirty percent of readers listed "very crowded" as a problem with their flight, and almost half our respondents called the seat comfort less than good. Airlines know passengers like space, but they also know every extra seat is a potential source of revenue. Over the years, they've learned to squeeze more seats into the same-size plane. And they've learned to fill a greater percentage of those seats through cut-rate tickets and other deals. Three-fifths of seats were filled on an average flight in

THE \$7.8-BILLION QUESTION

WHERE DO YOUR TICKET TAXES GO?

Every time you buy an airline ticket, the U.S. Government tacks on a 10 percent excise tax. That money goes to the Federal Aviation Administration's Airport and Airway Trust Fund, also known as the Aviation Trust Fund, supposedly to finance new runways, improved air-traffic control systems, and other projects. But in recent years, only 80 percent of the fund has actually been used. The remaining 20 percent—now approaching \$7.8-billion—has gone unspent. The reason? To make the Federal budget deficit appear smaller than it is.

Within the next year, consumers will encounter another aviation tax, this one levied by local airport authorities. Called a head tax, or passenger facility charge, it will cost as much as \$12 per round-trip. Like the excise tax, it's meant to finance airport construction and other improvements. Most major U.S. airports are expected to impose the new tax.

Domestic air traffic is projected to grow by more than 50 percent by the end of the decade. To handle traffic safely, airport authorities say they need to spend \$50-billion over

the next five years on new construction. But some industry watchers have questioned whether such a large new tax is necessary, since nearly \$8-billion in already collected tax revenue remains untapped.

When the Aviation Trust Fund was founded in 1970, its primary mandate was to finance airport capital projects, such as construction and repair work. For years, however, Congress has limited how much of its revenue the fund can spend. Recently, Congress also increased the portion of that spending that goes toward FAA operations, meaning such things as salaries and office overhead, rather than to capital improvements as the fund's founders intended.

Last year, Congress voted to spend down the Aviation Trust Fund over a period of five years, using that money for both operations and capital improvements. It also raised domestic ticket taxes from 8 percent to the current 10 percent. The additional 2 percent was designated for the Treasury's General Fund rather than for aviation.

tises its meals on billboards, was rated tops. The airline's typical coach menu isn't much different from that of other carriers—beef burgundy, sweet and sour chicken, stuffed shells—yet six out of ten of its passengers rated the food very good or better. Wolfgang Erbe, the airline's executive chef, boards planes in his white uniform to solicit passenger opinions. According to the consulting firm Airline Economics, Alaska spent \$7.47 per passenger on food during 1990, the most of any domestic airline. Next to Southwest, which serves only peanuts, muffins, and cookies, Hawaiian spent the least: \$1.54.

Three other airlines—Delta, America West, and Midway—were rated better than average for food service. TWA, Continental, and Eastern all fared worse than

average. (Snacks-only Southwest was excluded from our comparison.)

Passengers can't do much to improve the quality of their food, aside from brown-bagging. They can, however, improve their range of choices. Pan Am offers its frequent fliers an expanded menu, usually with one extra entree, if they request it when they make reservations. Most airlines also offer special meals: fruit, seafood, vegetarian, low-salt, low-cholesterol, high-fiber, and children's. Also available are kosher, Muslim (similar to kosher), and Hindu (spicy vegetarian) meals. Order at least 24 hours



"Would it bother you to hear how little I paid for this flight?"

in advance. But note: If you have an unforeseen change in itinerary, your special meal may take off without you.

Checking out check-in

About one in five respondents reported preflight problems, such as long waits at the check-in counter, difficulty obtaining flight information, rude or slow staffers, flight cancellations, or being bumped. More than one in four customers of Hawaiian, Pan Am, and Eastern experienced preflight headaches, particularly with long waits at check-in. Respondents gave Alaska and Delta the highest marks for preflight service.

All the larger airlines offer seat assignments and boarding passes in advance, so travelers who don't check luggage can avoid the wait entirely. To obtain that service, however, you may have to book through a travel agent or pay the highest coach fare.

Curbside check-in is another way to avoid lines. Though eliminated during the Gulf War for security reasons, it is being reinstated nationwide for domestic flights, now with tougher security measures.

When planes are overbooked, airlines usually offer free travel vouchers to people who volunteer to take a later flight. If you're bumped involuntarily, the airline will generally provide substitute transportation. If your substitute flight gets you to your destination within one hour of schedule, the airline will not owe you further compensation. However, if your substitute flight gets you there more than an hour late, you will be entitled to the equivalent of your one-way fare (up to \$200); if your arrival is more than two hours late, you will be entitled to the equivalent of twice your one-way fare (up to \$400). The latter penalty also applies if the airline fails to arrange

INVISIBLE INCENTIVES

HOW AIRLINES WOO TRAVEL AGENTS

Your travel agent booked you on a flight to Hawaii. You may know the agent received a 10 percent commission. But did you know your agent also got a \$25 bonus for giving that airline your business? Welcome to the lucrative world of travel-agency incentives.

All airlines pay travel agents a commission: 10 percent for domestic tickets, 8 percent for international tickets. Last year, the nation's 15 largest carriers spent more than \$6.6-billion in commissions. That cost is, of course, incorporated in the ticket price.

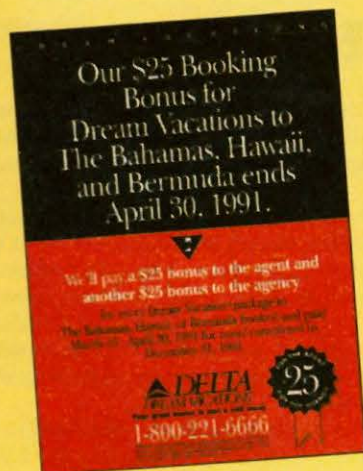
Some airlines also offer incentives called

"commission overrides" for agents who meet volume quotas. Overrides can run from 1 to 5 percent of the ticket price for domestic flights, and as high as 30 percent on international tickets.

And it doesn't stop with commissions. Continental Airlines and USAir recently advertised a \$50 bonus for agents putting their clients on certain round-trip flights.

Do these incentives influence agents' recommendations? "If the client doesn't care [which carrier he or she flies], I would guess overrides may be a factor," says Paul M. Ruden, a senior vice president of the American Society of Travel Agents. "But in most situations where there's any choice whatsoever... agents are not going to misdirect clients." Maybe so, but a poll of travel agents in the trade journal *Travel Weekly* last year found that more than half said they choose a carrier to obtain the added commissions at least some of the time.

Then there's the matter of the computer-reservation systems. Ninety-five percent of travel agencies are plugged into such a system, and the four systems in the United States are all owned by airlines. Despite Federal regulations meant to prevent such computer systems from giving undue competitive advantage to one carrier, the airline that owns the system can, as a practical matter, skew ticket selection in its favor. Travel agents say, for example, that it's easier to select seats and get boarding passes in advance if they buy a ticket from the airline that owns the computer system.



Sweetened dreams Delta advertised this \$25 booking bonus in a trade magazine for travel agents.

substitute transportation. To be eligible, you need a confirmed reservation on a plane with 61 or more seats; you must also have checked in before the airline's deadline. (These compensation rules apply only to U.S. domestic flights; rules on international flights differ.)

Each airline sets its own policy on delays and diversions. If a mechanical problem is the culprit, the airline may provide meal money, a free telephone call, or a hotel room. Carriers usually don't offer any special

assistance when delays are weather-related.

Airlines also cancel flights when there aren't enough passengers for them to make a profit. Currently, airlines are not required to tell passengers about these so-called "economic" cancellations.

Luggage in limbo

Of the 77 percent of our respondents who checked bags, one in five mentioned problems at the arrival end, most often a long wait. A few

customers reported more-serious problems: lost luggage (4 percent), damaged luggage (3 percent), or lost contents (1 percent). Alaska was rated superior in baggage handling. Delta and Southwest ranked better than average. And Continental, Pan Am, Eastern, and Hawaiian were judged worse than average.

There's no way to make your bags surface faster at the carousel. But labeling them inside and out with hard-to-remove tags will help them get to the right airport. Remove old

A FAILED EXPERIMENT?

DEREGULATION'S SAD LEGACY

PeopleExpress, Air Florida, New York Air. A decade ago, those upstart airlines were hailed as proof that when the Government lifted controls on prices and routes, the resulting competition would work to the consumer's benefit. Deregulation, as the process was called, was meant to encourage the growth of new airlines, create more choices for travelers, and drive down prices.

Today, most of deregulation's offspring are dead. Of 150 airlines started after 1978—the first year of deregulation—118 have failed or have merged with other carriers. Some airlines established before deregulation, such as Pan Am and TWA, struggle to survive.

Many analysts believe the industry will shrink to seven or eight airlines by the end of the decade. That would obviously mean fewer airlines with more control over the market.

Though consumers have benefited from lower prices and expanded choices of flights in many instances, the system that has evolved is not what deregulation's champions envisioned. What happened? For one thing, advocates didn't foresee how effectively major airlines would use the advantage of size to thwart their smaller rivals.

The majors gained a competitive edge by investing heavily in what the industry calls hub-and-spoke networks. The hub airport receives travelers from many places, then redistributes them, via the spokes, to others. Travelers benefited in one way, because the hub systems allow them to travel to more destinations without having to switch carriers. But for millions of Americans, the hub-and-spoke networks have meant pointless, time-consuming connections, purely for the convenience of an airline. Theodore P. Harris, a McLean, Va., airline consultant, has estimated that the average trip of under 2000 miles now takes twice as long as it did before deregulation.

The hub-and-spoke system has also aggravated flight delays. Most airlines schedule hub departures and arrivals during concentrated peak periods. When too many planes are scheduled to depart at once, most sit on the tarmac and wait. The Air Transport Association of America, which represents the airline industry, estimates that delays cost Americans \$2-billion a year in lost time.

Major carriers also hogged space at airports by holding onto long-term gate leases, even ones they didn't need. At La Guardia and Kennedy airports in New York City, National in Washington, D.C., and O'Hare in Chicago, only a set number of planes may depart and land each hour; the major carriers locked up those "landing slots," which had been given to them free by the Federal Government. If a new carrier wanted to fly

there, it frequently had to sublease slots and gates and pay to use the other airline's staff.

Michael E. Levine, dean of Yale's School of Organization and Management and former president of the now-defunct New York Air, says his airline had to pay American Airlines \$1000 per flight to use its gate staff. New York Air employees, he says, could have done the job for \$280.

The majors have also controlled vital information. They developed computerized reservation systems that naturally favored their own flights. Whenever a travel agent called up a route on the screen, the flights of the airline that owned the computer system appeared first. The Government stopped that practice in 1984. But the General Accounting Office says that other unfair practices continue.

Computers also made possible "yield management," a system to reap the most profit from each flight. To manage the system, airlines created several new fare categories, each with a barrage of restrictions. Fully refundable tickets, which were standard before deregulation, became a premium product. On the 20 most-traveled routes, their prices rose 45 percent between early 1988 and 1991. The Consumer Price Index, in contrast, rose 13.3 percent. Even the least expensive, nonrefundable tickets for those popular routes rose substantially during that period—37 percent, according to Runzheimer International, a travel research company.

In the first 10 years of deregulation, the Department of Transportation approved nearly every airline merger that was proposed, despite warnings that some carriers would monopolize certain airports. TWA's 1986 acquisition of Ozark Airlines gave it 82 percent of air traffic at Lambert Field in St. Louis. One year later, TWA's fares on 67 different routes into and out of St. Louis were 20 percent higher, an increase more than six times the rate of inflation at the time.

Residents in some less-populous states also have suffered. It's now easier than ever to fly from Bismarck, N.D., to an out-of-state destination. But in-state air service has virtually disappeared. To compensate, the University of North Dakota, in partnership with private sponsors, is developing a new air service, using student pilots from Taiwan.

Airline consolidation—and deteriorating service—is likely to continue. Weighted down by the heavy debt load they took on to expand in the 1980s and by unexpectedly high fuel costs early in this decade, several airlines now fight to stay aloft. The 20 largest airlines, which represent 97 percent of domestic air traffic, lost nearly \$4-billion in 1990.

commission-rebate service that can also save you a little money. For a flat booking fee of \$10 per domestic ticket, they rebate most of the 10 percent commission they receive from the airline.

■ People over age 62 can fly at a 10-percent discount on all domestic airlines. Many carriers also offer them discount travel coupons. Books of four or eight one-way coupons are available for as little as \$91 a coupon. One coupon is generally good for a one-way fare to most domestic destinations; however,

some airlines require two tickets in each direction for a transcontinental trip or a flight to Alaska or Hawaii. And, as the airlines are fond of saying, other restrictions may apply.

■ Frequent-flier programs offer seasonal discounts and promotions. They also offer coupons you can buy to upgrade to first class from certain coach tickets. The coupons range in price from \$15 to \$200 for each direction, depending on the carrier and length of your flight.

■ Another option is buying your ticket from a "consolidator." Consol-

idators sell discounted coach tickets in volume, either through travel agents or direct to the public. This strategy works better for overseas tickets than domestic ones. Consolidators often advertise in Sunday newspaper travel sections. A local travel agent should also be able to deal with one for you. Note that consolidator tickets are almost always usable only on the issuing airline, so if you need to switch airlines, you could be out of luck.

■ A more complicated strategy, called "nesting," can save you

RATINGS

Airlines

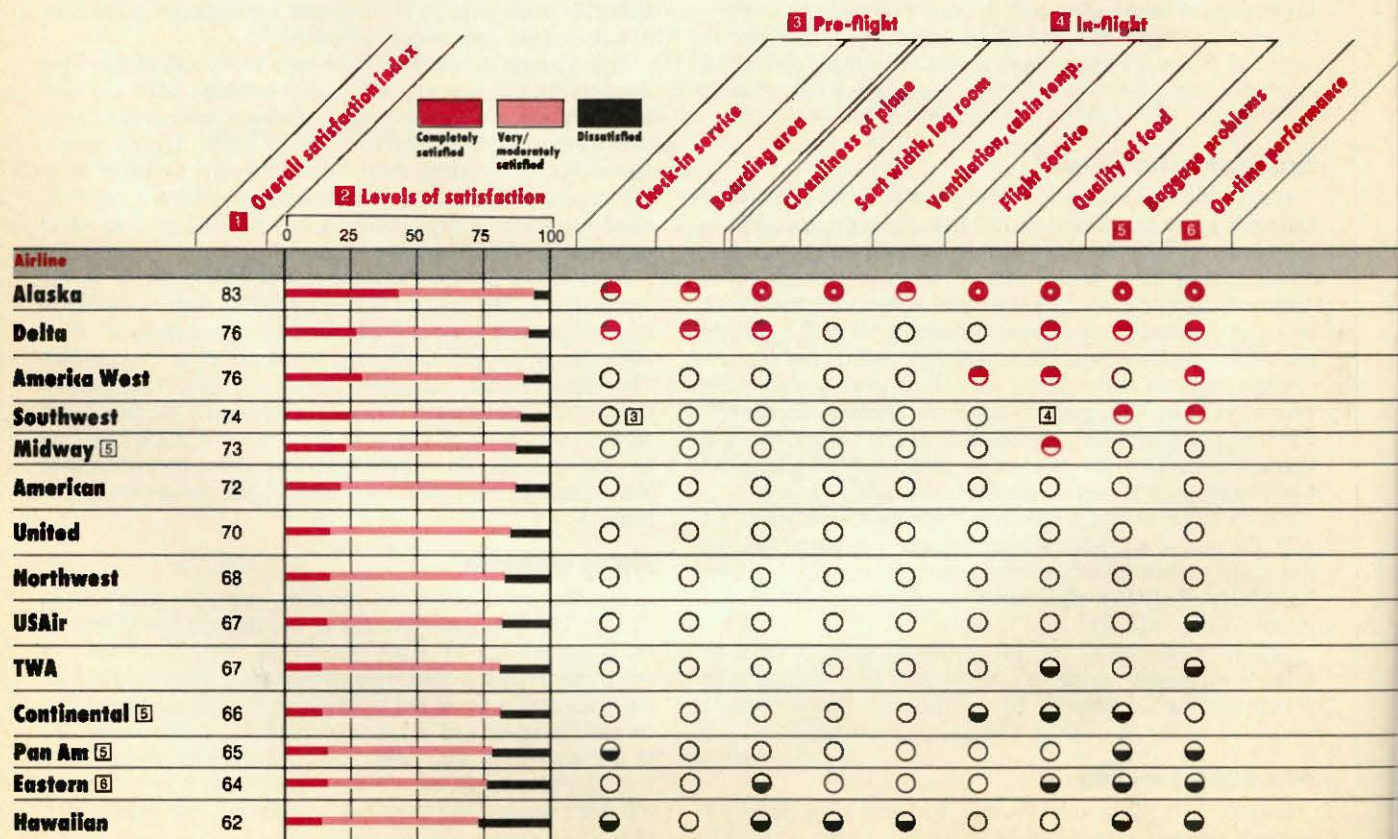
Listed in order of overall satisfaction, based on responses to CU's 1990 Annual Questionnaire. More than 140,000 subscribers provided data on approximately 250,000 domestic flights between January 1989 and May 1990. A flight is defined as a one-way trip on a single airline, including stops and connections. An airline's rating includes

commuter carriers that use its name. Eastern Airlines, which discontinued service in January 1991, was included to enable former customers to make comparisons with other airlines. The Eastern and Pan Am shuttles were not included in our Annual Questionnaire, as they represented a different type of service. Results reflect our readers' experiences and may not be representative of the U.S. population as a whole.

1 Overall satisfaction index. Respon-

dents were asked to describe how satisfied they were with their flights, using a six-point scale ranging from completely satisfied to completely dissatisfied. Had all passengers been completely satisfied with an airline, its index would have been 100; had all been completely dissatisfied, the index would have been 0. Differences of less than 3 points are not meaningful. More than 1500 flights were rated for each airline.

2 Levels of satisfaction. The percentage



1 USSR service scheduled to begin June 17.

2 International flights.

3 No seat assignments.

4 Serves only snacks.

money if you don't want to stay over on a Saturday night, as discounted tickets often require. Say you plan to fly from Cincinnati to Houston on Monday, August 12 and return to Cincinnati on Thursday, August 15. A three-day advance-purchase ticket would currently cost \$714 round-trip. However, you could buy *two* discounted round-trip tickets requiring Saturday-night stays: one originating on August 12 in Cincinnati and the other originating on August 15 in Houston. The cost of each ticket is currently \$318, or a

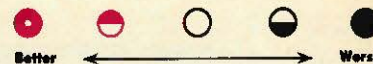
total of \$636. Just use the first part of each ticket and throw the second part away (or use it for a later trip). It's legal, and you'll save \$78.

Recommendations

If you're looking for the best domestic service and happen to be flying in the western U.S., our survey respondents' clear recommendation is Alaska Airlines. If you're not going where Alaska Airlines flies, choose one of the next five airlines in the Ratings; they significantly outperformed the seven

airlines at the bottom of the Ratings. United Airlines, seventh in the Ratings, was average.

If you're unhappy with your flight, complain to the airline and to the Department of Transportation. Our survey results suggest that passengers are often dissatisfied with some aspect of their flights, yet the DOT reports that fewer than 2 out of every 100,000 passengers filed complaints last year. The airlines' complaint numbers are listed in the Ratings. The DOT's number is 202-366-2220. ■



of respondents who said they were: completely satisfied; very or moderately satisfied; and somewhat, very, or completely dissatisfied with the airline overall.

3 Pre-flight. Respondents' evaluations of specific aspects of the pre-flight experience at the airport and boarding area. Note that these judgments, as well as the in-flight and post-flight judgments, are relative. Even the lowest-rated carriers were judged "good" or better on most attributes by a

majority of our survey respondents.

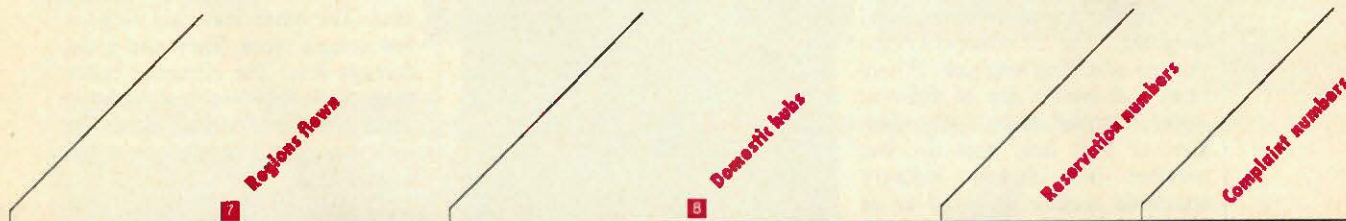
4 In-flight. Food quality was judged only by passengers who ate a full meal. Southwest Airlines, which serves only snacks, was not rated.

5 Baggage problems. Seventy-seven percent of our respondents checked a bag; baggage-problem ratings are based on the percentage of those passengers who experienced such difficulties as long waits for luggage and lost or damaged bags.

6 On-time performance. Reflects the percentage of respondents who reported arriving at their final destinations within 15 minutes of schedule. Overall, 73 percent of flights were on time.

7 Regions flown. As of May 1991; routes are subject to change.

8 Domestic hubs. U.S. cities in which the airline operates a major hub, or connection site. Cities are listed alphabetically.



Regions flown	Domestic hubs	Reservation numbers	Complaint numbers
Western states, Mexico, USSR [1]	Anchorage; Portland, Ore.; Seattle	800-426-0333	206-431-7286
International	Atlanta; Cincinnati; Dallas-Ft. Worth; Los Angeles; Orlando; Salt Lake City	800-221-1212 800-241-4141 [2]	404-715-1450
Primarily Western and Middle Western states, Canada, Japan	Honolulu; Las Vegas; Phoenix	800-247-5692	800-247-5692, ext. 6019
Southwestern and Middle Western states	Dallas/Love Field; Houston; Phoenix	800-531-5601	214-904-4223
Primarily Middle Western states, Bahamas	Chicago/Midway	800-866-9000	800-866-9000, ext. 4684
International	Chicago/O'Hare; Dallas-Ft. Worth; Miami; Nashville; Raleigh-Durham; San Jose, Calif.; San Juan, P.R.	800-433-7300	817-967-2000
International	Chicago/O'Hare; Denver; San Francisco; Washington/Dulles	800-241-6522 800-538-2929 [2]	708-952-6796
International	Detroit; Memphis; Minneapolis-St. Paul; Washington/National	800-225-2525	612-726-2046
International	Baltimore-Washington; Charlotte, N.C.; Dayton; Philadelphia; Pittsburgh	800-428-4322	919-661-0061
International	New York/Kennedy; St. Louis	800-221-2000 800-892-4141 [2]	914-242-3172
International	Cleveland; Denver; Houston; Newark, N.J.	800-525-0280 800-231-0856 [2]	713-987-6500
International	Miami; New York/Kennedy	800-221-1111	800-428-1100
—	—	—	—
Hawaii, 3 Western states, South Pacific islands, Japan	Honolulu	800-367-5320	808-835-3424

[1] In bankruptcy but still flying.

[2] Ceased operations Jan. 18.