Air Travel Is Going to Be Very Bad, for a Very Long Time

Flying used to be unpleasant. But scarcity, low demand, and public-health risks could make it unbearable.

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Editor's Note: *This article is part of "Uncharted," a series about the world we're leaving behind, and the one being remade by the pandemic.*

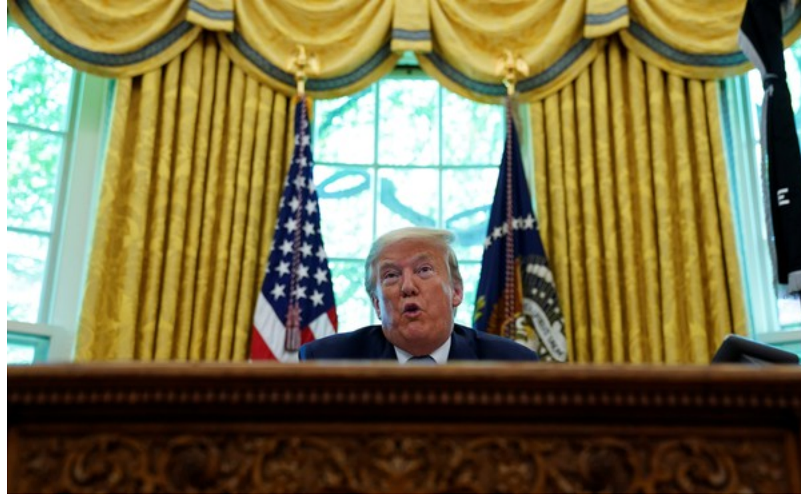
I last took a "normal" commercial-airline flight back in February. It was normal in that most people did not seem to be having a good time. Before the flight, passengers lumbered out of their Ubers and taxis, or stepped off the

shuttles from the rental-car offices and remote parking, and trudged through the familiar series of lines.

Lines to check in. Lines for the TSA checkpoints. Lines at the departure gate. Lines at restaurants and coffee shops to get the food and drink that the airlines no longer provide. The eye-rolling status-jockeying in the pile-up at the departure gate—"Excuse me, but are you really in Group 1?"—followed by eye-rolling in the aisle about someone hogging precious overhead-bin space.

I could go on—the baggage fees, the decreased "seat pitch" that jams your knees into the person in front of you, the cancellations and ripple-effect schedule delays—but less is more when it comes to an experience so many people have shared. Before the airline-deregulation revolution of the 1970s, wrought by Jimmy Carter, fares were much higher than they are now, as were the annual crash and fatality rates; the share of Americans who had ever taken a flight was much lower. Now, in any given year, nearly half of the American public takes at least one commercial flight, and the average fare per mile has been in long-term decline.

More by James Fallows



[*Read: I just flew. It was worse than I thought it would be.*]

I said "now," but of course I mean then: then, as of my latest visit to an airport, in February. Then, before the lockdowns. Then, before America's main carriers mothballed about half their fleets. Then, before the number of passengers arriving at airports collapsed from about 2.3 million each day to about 95,000. The trade

group Airlines for America declined to let me speak to its head economist. I like to think that it was trying to shield him from having too many depressing discussions in a row. But they sent a fact sheet showing that in April 2020 travel bookings were down by 98 percent from last year's levels and that the average domestic flight had 12.5 passengers on board. (Later they reported that the average passenger count had fallen to 10—and this is despite some reports of planes operating with full passenger loads.) In early May, Warren Buffett, renowned for his messages of long-term optimism about U.S. stocks during previous financial downturns, announced that Berkshire Hathaway was selling all of its substantial holdings in the four major U.S. airlines: American, Delta, United, and Southwest. A few days earlier, British Airways announced that it was laying off some 12,000 employees, nearly one-third of its entire staff.

Of all the industries devastated by the coronavirus pandemic and the lockdown—restaurants and bars, hotels and convention centers, movie theaters and shopping malls—the airlines' situation is in a sense the worst. Most of the other businesses are suffering because they have been told to close. The airlines are suffering in part because they have been told to stay open. As a condition of the recent bailout packages, and in order to retain long-term rights to their routes, airlines need to keep flying ghost routes: planes with almost no passengers but a full flight crew and cabin staff.

Then, the airline hell was one of too many competing for too little. Too many passengers for the facilities at the airport and the space aboard the plane. Too many planes for the available takeoff and landing slots. Too many cars for the available curb space. Too many loads of baggage for rush-hour handling capacity. Everywhere you looked, too many or too much.

Now, too few. And that is the prospect for the foreseeable future. The airline business has more than one metabolism. Minute by minute, airlines are adjusting schedules and fares. But in placing bets on new aircraft, they must try to imagine circumstances that lie decades —and many business and technology cycles—in the future. Boeing began laying plans for its 737 series in the mid-1960s. The planning that led to the ill-starred 737 Max began a dozen years before its first crash.

How the airline and aviation world will look a generation from now, no one can say. Sustainable biofuels or more practical electric-powered aircraft? Or a climate-driven backlash against air travel as a whole? Chinese progress in their long-standing challenge to the Boeing-Airbus duopoly (a project whose origin I described in a book eight years ago)? The even longer-standing dream of flying cars? A virtual-reality breakthrough that makes Zoom tolerable and thus reduces the incentive to travel in the first place? Anything could happen.

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We can't know about that future. But people I spoke with during the past several weeks—economists, engineers, aviation analysts, professional pilots—were more certain about what the next few years will bring: namely, sustained bad times for the world's airlines. What I saw just two months ago in a bustling airport, no one will see, anywhere, for a very long time. That is because, as Jon Ostrower, the editor of *The Air Current*, put it to me, "there are only two things that airlines can do to make people come back." He explained what they would be: "One is a vaccine, so people feel safe going to the airport or sitting with 150 strangers in a plane. The other is people having the wherewithal to travel. Do you have a job? Do you have enough money that you can think of taking your family on a vacation? These are things that control the airlines' future, and that they cannot do anything about."

"For all intents and purposes, the airlines are shut down now," Patrick Smith, an airline pilot and author of the Ask the Pilot website, told me. "They're still flying, but at vastly reduced levels. The majors are running maybe 5 or 10 percent of their normal number of departures. Clearly this isn't sustainable. Survivability depends on how quickly passengers come back." In early April, Smith wrote on his web site:

> Last Monday night I flew a 767 into New York. Was that the last commercial flight I will ever pilot? It is not inconceivable. Enough of me was convinced of it that I

> asked the captain if I could fly the leg and make the landing.

Smith told me later in the month that he had made one more flight and one more landing since then. "I expect to fly sporadically in the weeks ahead, and employees are furlough-protected at least through the summer. What happens beyond that point is unknown, however. If passengers don't return in significant enough numbers, the situation could be very, very dire."

When will the airlines return to "normal" as we knew it a few months ago? That was the question I asked everyone I spoke with. "Maybe five years," one person said. "I think four years," said an optimist. Another person guessed seven. "I think never," said an airline pilot, now on indefinite furlough.

But between now and five to seven years from now, some people will have to, or will choose to, travel. Maybe there is a medical emergency. Maybe there is a must-do business deal. Maybe something else occurs. The TSA has a fascinating site that gives live daily updates on the numbers coming through its security stations. In the middle of April, only 4 percent of the prior year's number of passengers was being checked by the TSA. Two weekends ago, the figure hit a recent high of nearly 7 percent—about 170,000 passengers, versus more than 2.5 million last year.

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Let's assume it keeps creeping up—to maybe 10 percent of previous levels, or 15 percent. That is still a catastrophe for the airlines, but it's a large enough number to raise this question: What will air travel be like in the time before a vaccine? I have a personal interest in this question. Sometime in the coming weeks, for extended-family reasons, I may go to Dulles Airport outside Washington, D.C., where I've started or ended countless trips, for a flight under today's new circumstances to California. If that happens, I'll report later on what I saw and found, as *The Atlantic*'s McKay Coppins has himself recently done. Here is what I have learned so far about what to expect.

Buying the ticket. Obviously there are fewer flights to choose from, as airlines idle as much of their fleet as possible and offer only the flights that they have a regulatory or other nonbusiness obligation to maintain. Less obviously, the fares are not all as cheap as you might expect, considering that most planes are flying nearly empty and the airlines are losing money each time one takes off. Some bargain fares do pop up: I have seen $199-or-less, sometimes much less, offers for coast-to-coast flights on mainstream carriers that used to charge three or four (or eight) times as much.

"Why aren't you seeing the bargain fares you thought you'd find?" Helane Becker, a managing director at the

Cowen research group and a longtime analyst of the airline industry, said to me. “The reason is that the airlines have no incentive to cut fares. Usually you can stimulate demand for leisure travel with lower fares. But now you can’t.” A pilot for an international airline told me, “You could always count on filling a flight if you just lowered the price. That won’t be true for a while.”

Becker said that if I were scouring a range of discount-fare sites, such as FareCompare.com (as I have done), I would see “fares that are crazy low.” The catch, according to Becker, is that many of those flights might be “canceled at the last minute, as they adjust to get as much traffic as they can onto the fewest flights.”

When can passengers start expecting lower fares? According to several analysts, not until demand for air travel starts to go up again—and price competition once again becomes a factor in people’s decisions on whether to fly. Richard Aboulafia, the vice president of analysis at the Teal Group, an aerospace-and-defense-analysis company, said, “Once people start coming back, then you try to build demand with mega-cheap fares. Until then, there is no point.”

Check-in and security. Anyone who has traveled through China in the 15-plus years since the SARS outbreak is familiar with the large temperature-check gates that inbound and outbound passengers must walk through. Some of them look like bigger versions of the

metal-detector gates that are standard-issue in many U.S. buildings. (Write your own essay on the threats each society is concerned about.) The gates alert quarantine officers to the presence of anyone who seems to have a fever, enabling individual follow-up examination by thermometer. Virtually no U.S. airports ran passengers through such equipment a year ago, and virtually all of them are likely to do so a year from now.

As you check in and go through security, you'll of course wear a mask. A few airlines have already required this. All are likely to do so, probably soon.

Adam Serwer: The coronavirus was an emergency until Trump found out who was dying

Everything will be slower. If you check baggage, the handles may need to be wiped before staff members touch them. If you don't think you'll be checking baggage, think again: The airlines will likely crack down further on carry-on items, which potentially come into contact with other passengers. On the bright side, less carry-on baggage will reduce the rugby-scrum nature of the boarding process. It will also diminish impending delays at the TSA checkpoint, where agents may need to stop and wipe down bins after exposure to each passenger's coat and bags. "You can wipe down every bin when you have only 100,000 people traveling every day," Helane Becker told me. "But if you have 500,000 people"—still less than a quarter of what the volume

used to be—“it is going to be a nightmare.”

Everyone I spoke with said that the long-term effects of this public-health crisis are likely to match the “security theater” since the 9/11 attacks—for instance, the requirement that most passengers take off their shoes at TSA checkpoints, now more than 18 years after a man named Richard Reid attempted to blow up a plane by lighting the fuse to some explosives he had packed into the soles of his boots, and the ban on taking more than a few ounces of liquid aboard a flight. For the aviation business, “public-health theater” might include hand-sanitizer dispensers placed throughout airports; or tape markings on the floor indicating ideal separation distances; or other steps that can’t hurt, but also can’t solve the fundamental problem of packing a lot of people into a confined space. Will there be “healthy traveler” credentials that serve as a counterpart to today’s “trusted traveler” status? Will passengers be more willing, or less, to trade their personal privacy, and personal trackability, to increase their own convenience or advance overall safety? No one presumed to know the answers yet.

Aboard the plane. Worried about being stuck in a middle seat? Worry no more. For the foreseeable future, many airlines are taking bookings for aisle and window seats only. At the moment, that’s because, with occasional well-publicized exceptions, they don’t come close to having enough demand to fill the middle seats. Anyone

who has traveled business class on most intra-European flights has had a taste of what lies ahead for U.S. carriers. The aisle and window seats are filled as normal, and the middle seat has a kind of bolster put across it, making the adjacent passengers feel more special.

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At some point, the end of the middle seat could create economic problems for the airlines—since it means, by definition, that a plane capable of carrying 150 paying customers will reach capacity at 100. "That is a long way away," Jon Ostrower told me. "That is way down the list of the airlines' things to worry about."

What about the chances of contracting an illness while aboard? You should be keeping on your mask, as should the other travelers. You'll be in a seat that the airlines have scrubbed down before you get there—and if you're smart, you'll wipe it down again yourself. (I used to think that people who carried Purell and wipes onto airliners were prissy. That was then.) You'll also carry disinfecting towelettes to wipe down anything you touch in the bathroom, or elsewhere aboard the airplane. The flight attendants will be wearing gloves and masks. They may give you bottled water, or to-go bags of food. Something nicer will presumably happen in the "premium" cabins. Maybe a return to attendants wearing white gloves?

And as for the air quality? Despite some alarming recent reports, pilots and engineers I spoke with emphasized that airplane air was in theory healthier than air in some other enclosed spaces, such as offices and stores. "All the circulated air goes through efficient filters"—in some cases like those in hospitals—"and it's refreshed with outside air every two or three minutes," Ostrower explained. But even the best filters can't protect nearby passengers from someone who sneezes. Ostrower acknowledged that long before the pandemic, "one certainty of doing frequent coast-to-coast flights is that I always ended up with a cold."

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Another in-flight detail that will probably change: few or no pillows and blankets, even from the carriers that had still been offering them. "Blankets are not likely to be welcome sights until there's a vaccine," Richard Aboulafia noted. "Let's just say the minimalist look might apply to interiors." Have you griped about the cost, speed, or reliability of airborne Wi-Fi services? You'll have fewer of those complaints to make, because some carriers will just eliminate the service. For most of them it has been a technically shaky feature that doesn't pay its own way.

And what about aviation safety in the more familiar sense—the trouble-free takeoff, cruise, and landing of a plane? No one I spoke with suggested any reason for concern on this front. The main complication is that everyone

employed in aviation, most of all the flight crew, is subject to strict timetables for maintaining their certifications. The most imminently important, from the airlines' point of view, is included in the Federal Aviation Administration's rule [14 CFR 121.439], which covers "recent experience" for airline pilots. In order to serve as a "required flight crewmember"—that is, a captain or first officer—a pilot must have conducted three takeoffs and landings in the past 90 days. Several of the airline pilots I spoke with were watching the clock run out on their own recent-experience qualifications.

"As of right now, May 20 is when I drop out of currency," Patrick Smith told me. "My carrier's training center has been closed for a month. With so many of us facing currency issues, the logistics of how they're going to run people through training is going to be a challenge for sure."

Another pilot said, "There's going to be a huge rush on the simulators—if they ever call us back."

On the other end. For passengers, there will likely be more temperature checks on arrival, and you'll want to wipe down your bags when you receive them. From there, you're on your own. For flight crews, it may be a more complicated process. One pilot for a non-U.S .carrier said that he expected crews on international trips to be subject to a kind of air-lock quarantine. "They will take us in a bus from the tarmac to the hotel, check us in, and be

sure we stay in our rooms until they collect us for the flight out."

"In every way but one, this is the absolute dream world if you're an airline manager," Aboulafia told me. The big four costs in aviation, according to Aboulafia, are: aircraft, interest payments, fuel, and the crew—and each of those costs is plummeting. "It's the cheapest time—ever—to lease or buy aircraft," he said. (Many airlines lease, rather than own, the planes that they fly.) "The poor aircraft are there like rabbits in an adoption center, saying 'Please, take me! Take me!' Interest rates are practically zero. With the oil glut, people are practically paying you to take their fuel. And the crew's interest in joining unions or arguing has also disappeared. It would be the best of times …" Except that no one wants to fly.

And from the passengers' perspective? The people I spoke with all said that the airline system so many of us complained about just two months ago was as good as things were ever going to get.

"Commercial air travel has never been safer than it is today," Smith said. "Airfares are a fraction of what they were decades ago. Younger people especially have no memory of how expensive flying once was. First- and business-class cabins are more luxurious than ever, and even economy class, for all the griping people do, is often packed with amenities that didn't used to exist." From a technical standpoint, airliners are much quieter than they

used to be, both for passengers aboard the plane and for people on the ground. While carbon emissions from aviation obviously remain a crucial concern, aircraft engines are significantly cleaner and more efficient year after year.

“Whether you’re talking safety, affordability, convenience, or even comfort, if ever there was a ‘golden age’ of air travel, I’d say it’s right now,” Smith told me.

“Or, well, at least until two months ago.”

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.

James Fallows is a staff writer at The Atlantic and has written for the magazine since the late 1970s. He has reported extensively from outside the United States and once worked as President Jimmy Carter's chief speechwriter. He and his wife, Deborah Fallows, are the authors of the 2018 book Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey Into the Heart of America, which was a national best seller and is the basis of a forthcoming HBO documentary.