

Holiday chaos as drones shut London's Gatwick Airport

December 20 2018, by Gregory Katz



Time	Destination	Flight Number	Status
21:30	Venice	BA2759	Expected 11:06
21:50	Sal	BA2587	Estimated 14:19
		MT1157	Diverted
Thursday, 20 December			
03:30	Buenos Aires	DI7506	Diverted
05:30	Hong Kong	CX343	Diverted
06:00	Bridgetown	BA2154	Expected 06:07
06:30	Bermuda	BA2232	Estimated 13:08
06:50	Fort Lauderdale	DI7044	Diverted
06:55	Chicago	DI7152	Diverted
07:00	Paris CdG	VY8770	Estimated 15:00
07:10	New York	DI7018	Expected 08:43
07:15	Goa	MT2761	Estimated 14:20
07:30	Orlando	BA2036	Estimated 13:47
07:35	St Kitts	BA2256	Expected 08:17
	via Antigua		
07:40	Edinburgh	BA2931	Delayed
07:55	Dublin	EI230	Estimated 09:00
07:55	Guernsey	GR600	Cancelled
08:05	Jersey	BA2769	Delayed
08:05	Copenhagen	D82899	Cancelled
08:10	Boston	DI7148	Diverted
08:10	Dublin	FR120	Cancelled

The arrivals board at Gatwick Airport showing cancelled, diverted and delayed flights as the airport remains closed with incoming flights delayed or diverted to other airports, after drones were spotted over the airfield last night and this morning Thursday Dec. 20, 2018. London's Gatwick Airport remained shut during the busy holiday period Thursday while police and airport officials investigate reports that drones were flying in the area of the airfield. (Thomas Hornall/PA via AP)

Drones spotted over the runway forced the shutdown of London's Gatwick Airport on Thursday during one of the busiest times of the year, stranding or delaying tens of thousands of Christmas-season travelers

and setting off a hunt for the operator of the intruding aircraft.

The prospect of a deadly collision between what police called "industrial"-grade drones and an airliner led authorities to stop all flights in and out.

Police said that they had no doubt the intrusion was a deliberate attempt to disrupt operations at the airport during a peak period but that there were "absolutely no indications to suggest this is terror-related."

About 20 police units from two forces tried in vain to find the drone operator as soon as the first unmanned aircraft was spotted above Gatwick on Wednesday evening. Police told airport officials it was too risky to try to shoot down the drones—stray bullets might kill someone.

"Each time we believe we get close to the operator, the drone disappears. When we look to reopen the airfield, the drone reappears," said Sussex Police Superintendent Justin Burtenshaw. He said the newer-generation drones are bigger and have more range, making it harder for police to zero in on the person controlling the device.

Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson said the military would be deployed to help police. He said the armed forces would bring "unique capabilities" but gave no details.



Queues of passengers wait at the check-in desks at Gatwick Airport, as the airport remains closed and with incoming flights delayed or diverted to other airports, after drones were spotted over the airfield last night and this morning Thursday Dec. 20, 2018. London's Gatwick Airport remained shut during the busy holiday period Thursday while police and airport officials investigate reports that drones were flying in the area of the airfield. (Thomas Hornall/PA via AP)

Drones could get sucked into a jet engine or crash through a windshield, incapacitating the pilot.

The crisis at Gatwick had a ripple effect on air travel in Britain, continental Europe and beyond as incoming flights were sent to other locations and outgoing ones were stopped.

Travelers described freezing conditions overnight at Gatwick as hundreds slept on benches and floors, and passengers and their families complained they weren't being kept informed about re-routed flights.

"We understand it's an emergency situation, but the lack of information is really surprising," said Vanessa Avila, an American based in Britain who works for the U.S. military. Her mother was on a flight from Florida to Gatwick that ended up landing in the northern English city of Manchester.

Gatwick—Britain's second-busiest airport by passenger numbers—first closed its runway Wednesday evening after two drones were spotted. It reopened briefly at about 3 a.m. Thursday, but shut down 45 minutes later after further sightings.



Queues of passengers cross a concourse in Gatwick Airport, as the airport remains closed with incoming flights delayed or diverted to other airports, after drones were spotted over the airfield last night and this morning Thursday Dec. 20, 2018. London's Gatwick Airport remained shut during the busy holiday period Thursday while police and airport officials investigate reports that drones were flying in the area of the airfield. (Thomas Hornall/PA via AP)

The airport, about 30 miles (45 kilometers) south of London, sees more than 43 million passengers a year. About 110,000 had been scheduled to pass through on Thursday.

Police said the drones were of an "industrial specification," an indication they weren't small, inexpensive machines. The larger drones are more dangerous to jets in flight and can stay in the air longer than the models sold to amateur enthusiasts.

The airport's two terminals were jammed with thousands of weary travelers.

"I haven't slept since yesterday morning. We are very tired. It's freezing, we are cold, having to wear all of these coats for extra blankets," said Andri Kyprianou, of Cyprus, whose flight to Kiev was canceled.

"There were pregnant women. One of them was sleeping on the floor. There were people with small babies in here overnight. We saw disabled people on chairs. There were young children sleeping on the floor."



In this Dec. 1, 2010, file photo, a terminal link train arrives behind a glass

window at the snow covered terminal station at London's Gatwick Airport in Horley, England. London's Gatwick Airport shut down late Wednesday, Dec. 19, 2018, while officials urgently investigated reports that two drones were flying above the airfield. (AP Photo/Sang Tan, File)

Passengers complained on Twitter that their Gatwick-bound flights had been diverted to London's Heathrow Airport, Manchester, Birmingham and other cities.

Luke McComiskie, who landed in Manchester, more than 160 miles (260 kilometers) from London, said the situation "was just chaos, and they had only two coaches (buses) and taxis charging people 600 pounds (\$760) to get to Gatwick."

Pilots have reported numerous close calls with drones in recent years in Britain, and aviation authorities have warned of the growing risk of a disastrous collision. Britain has toughened its laws on drones, and flying one within 1 kilometer (0.6 miles) of an airport is punishable by up to five years in prison.

Gatwick briefly closed its runway last year when a drone was spotted in the area. A drone also briefly led to the shutdown of Dubai's international airport in 2016.

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