

Business, leisure travelers ponder flying without laptops

17 May 2017, by David Koenig And Joyce M. Rosenberg



In this Saturday, April 17, 2010, file photo, a traveler from Malaysia uses his laptop computer at Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam, Netherlands. International air travelers might soon rediscover magazines, paperbacks and playing cards. Airline passengers have become hooked on their laptops and tablets to get work done or just kill time during long flights. But U.S. aviation-security officials appear determined to ban large electronic devices in the cabin of flights from Europe. (AP Photo/Peter Dejong, File)

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Airline passengers have become hooked on their laptops and tablets to get work done or just kill time during long flights. But U.S. aviation-security officials appear determined to ban large electronic devices in the cabin of flights from Europe.

Business travelers are worried about lost productivity, laptops in checked baggage being stolen or damaged, or even leaving the machine home if their employer won't let them check it on a plane. Parents are pondering how to keep children occupied.

On Wednesday, U.S. and European Union officials

exchanged information about threats to aviation, believed to include bombs hidden in [laptop](#) computers. Airline and travel groups are concerned about the possibility that a ban on laptops and tablet computers that currently applies to mostly Middle Eastern flights will be expanded to include U.S.-bound flights from Europe.

The officials agreed to meet again next week.

The airlines are still talking to government officials about how a laptop ban would look at European airports. It will require one set of screening rules for U.S.-bound travelers, another for people headed elsewhere.

Nearly 400 flights leave Europe for the U.S. each day, carrying about 85,000 people, according to airline industry and U.S. government figures. The flights are popular with vacationers and critical to many [business travelers](#), who often buy pricier tickets.

The laptop ban in March covered far fewer flights—about 50 on an average day—and hurt Middle Eastern carriers by targeting their hub airports. Emirates blamed the ban among factors reducing demand when it scaled back flights to the U.S.

Expanding the ban to Europe will hit American Airlines, Delta Air Lines and United Airlines and their European partners, and it will affect many more travelers.

Airlines fear that expanding the ban will lead to more flight delays and increase their liability for theft or damage to electronics devices in checked luggage. Safety advocates worry that putting devices with lithium batteries in the cargo hold will create a fire threat.

Airline groups propose several alternatives to the laptop ban, including more use of machines that

detect residue from explosives, turning devices on to demonstrate that they are not bombs, and sorting low-risk passengers from high-risk ones, presumably to let frequent travelers keep their laptops in the cabin.

Business travelers are keenly interested in the outcome.

Michael McCormick, executive director of the Global Business Travel Association, said he believes the threat identified by security officials is real, but the laptop ban will hurt business travel, at least in the short term.

"There are a certain amount of things you can do on your smartphone to stay in contact," McCormick said. For laptops that must be checked, he added, companies will take steps to better lock down information contained on them "and then just deal with the short-term challenges and loss of productivity."

The International Air Transport Association, a trade group for global airlines, said banning laptops in the cabin would cost passengers \$1.1 billion a year, mostly in lost productivity for business travelers.

"Businesses will cancel trips rather than risk having laptops checked due to risk to confidential information," said the group's CEO, Alexandre de Juniac.

Edward Pizzarello, an investor in a Washington-area venture-capital firm who also writes a travel blog, is holding off booking a July business trip to Germany and the United Kingdom "until I figure out what's going on."

Pizzarello won't put his everyday laptop in checked luggage—"too much sensitive info." So he might buy a cheaper machine to use on the outgoing flight and while in Europe, then wipe it clean before checking it on the return flight. He is also considering flying back through Canada to sidestep the ban, although that would likely cost more.

"Maybe I don't take the trip," he said. "That's one of the options. It's not my first option."

David Lewis, who operates a human-resources consulting firm in Connecticut, said he would prefer closer inspection of his laptop over getting on a plane without it.

"I will wind up working four to five straight hours, which is like 15 in an office because of the lack of interruptions," Lewis said of his trans-Atlantic flights. "It's going to have an adverse effect on how often I'm going to make those trips."

Rachel Winard, who owns a skin-care products company in New York, writes on her laptop during flights to and from Europe. She said she will use her cellphone—those aren't covered by the ban—to answer emails.

"It's not a deal breaker," she said of not having her laptop, "but it is definitely time that I would happily use for my work."

Small business consultant Gene Marks said he and many of his clients work when flying to and from Europe. Still, he tried to put the annoyance of a ban in perspective.

"I would be more anxious if there was a bomb on my flight," Marks said. Besides, he said, he sees plenty of [business](#) travelers who spend the [flight](#) sleeping.

Many leisure travelers use laptops and tablets to while away the hours watching movies or playing games, or to keep their kids entertained. They might have to turn back the clock.

"It is worth remembering that families were flying together for a few decades before digital entertainment came along," said Eileen Gunn of travel website FamiliesGo. "Maybe this is a good excuse to rely a bit less on electronics for both parents and kids."

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