

Worried about flying on a 737 Max? Your options may be few

October 16 2019, by David Koenig



In this June 27, 2019, file photo dozens of grounded Boeing 737 MAX airplanes crowd a parking area adjacent to Boeing Field in Seattle. Passengers who refuse to fly on a Boeing Max won't be entitled to compensation if they cancel. However, travel experts think airlines will be very flexible in rebooking passengers or giving them refunds if they're afraid to fly on a plane that has crashed twice. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, File)

At some point early next year, air travelers will need to decide if they're willing to take a flight on a Boeing 737 Max.

If they're not, they'll need to find out what their travel options are.

There will be no government-ordered compensation in North America or Europe for travelers who are afraid to get on the [plane](#) that has crashed twice, killing 346 people. Not after aviation regulators deem the Max safe.

However, airlines are likely to be more flexible in letting passengers change their schedules to avoid flying on a Max, at least for a while.

"We will take care of customers who are not comfortable flying on the Max. We will rebook them," said American Airlines spokesman Ross Feinstein. The airline won't charge those passengers the standard \$200 fee for changing a ticket, he said.

It's unclear how long that flexibility will last. Airlines are likely to gauge media coverage and [passenger](#) sentiment about the Max. Once the plane recedes from the news and customer confidence grows, airlines could go back to their regular policies around canceling and changing flights.

Also, while they will be willing to rebook passengers free of charge for a while, that doesn't mean that American, Southwest Airlines and United Airlines—the three U.S. carriers that fly the Max—can get you on the next flight. They are under no obligation to find a seat for you on another carrier, or to pay for a hotel room if they don't have an available seat until the next day.

"If passengers go to the airport and decide not to fly because the flight is going to be operated by a Max, they will not be able to get compensation because it will be their own decision to cancel their trip, it will not be the

decision of the airline," said Chrystel Erotokritou, who tracks compensation for AirHelp, a company that offers to help passengers with airline-service problems.



In this May 8, 2019, file photo a Boeing 737 MAX 8 jetliner being built for Turkish Airlines takes off on a test flight in Renton, Wash. Passengers who refuse to fly on a Boeing Max won't be entitled to compensation if they cancel. However, travel experts think airlines will be very flexible in rebooking passengers or giving them refunds if they're afraid to fly on a plane that has crashed twice. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, File)

And if the airline offers to put the customer on a flight three days later, "there isn't much the passenger can do," Erotokritou said. "Either they fly with the Max or they cancel their trip, because when the (Max)

comes back into service, it will mean that the aviation authorities in the U.S. and the E.U. now consider this aircraft to be perfectly safe."

It is safe to assume that most airline passengers have no idea what model of plane they are booked on, or whether it is a Boeing, an Airbus, or something else. Even after they board the plane.

American, Southwest and United Airlines, the three U.S. carriers that own Max jets, display the type of plane for every flight on their online schedules.

However, airlines routinely swap planes when there is a mechanical issue with one, or when an incoming plane is arriving too late. That means travelers who carefully checked the airline website to make sure they weren't buying a ticket on a Max could wind up on one anyway, with no advance warning.

If that happens, consumer advocates say passengers should talk to the gate agent immediately.

"You should indicate that you're fearful of this plane and it would be better for everybody if they allow you to take another flight or give you a credit or a refund," said Paul Hudson, the president of FlyersRights.org, an advocacy group that sprung from protests over long ground delays during which passengers were trapped on planes. "You don't want a flyer who is panicked and causing problems on the flight."

Aware of this situation, American and United say they will not use the Max as a last-minute substitute for other planes, although it's not clear how long they will stick to that policy.

Gary Leff, who writes a popular travel blog called View from the Wing, thinks [airlines](#) will have to notify passengers waiting for the plane if a

substitution means their flight will use a Max.



In this April 26, 2019, file photo a worker walks past a Boeing 737 MAX 8 airplane being built for Oman Air at Boeing's assembly facility in Renton, Wash. Passengers who refuse to fly on a Boeing Max won't be entitled to compensation if they cancel. However, travel experts think airlines will be very flexible in rebooking passengers or giving them refunds if they're afraid to fly on a plane that has crashed twice. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, File)

"I think there will be announcements—people will know they are getting on a Max, especially in the case of an aircraft substitution," Leff said. Airline officials, he said, "don't want customers freaking out after

pushback (from the gate) or after takeoff."

American, Southwest and United said they are still finishing details for the return of the Max and how to communicate with customers. When the time comes, they will stress that the plane will have been certified as safe by the Federal Aviation Administration.

Tony Roach, Southwest's managing director of customer experience, said the airline will highlight the software upgrades and additional pilot training that will be required before the Max is recertified. United spokesman Frank Benenati said the airline "will be transparent—and communicate in advance—with our customers who are booked to fly on a Max." Feinstein, the American spokesman, said his airline's pilots will assure customers that the plane is safe.

Of course, there is one fail-safe strategy for travelers who are determined to avoid the Boeing plane: "If you really want to be absolutely sure, you can fly on an airline that doesn't have any MAXes," said Hudson, the passenger advocate.

Delta Air Lines is the largest U.S. carrier that has never used the Max, and its CEO said last week Delta benefitted over the summer from the thousands of Max-related cancellations at Southwest, American and United.

It is still unclear when the Max will fly again. Boeing began working on updating the plane's [flight](#) software shortly after the Oct. 29 crash of a Lion Air jet off the coast of Indonesia. When the plane was grounded after the second crash—an Ethiopian Airlines Max went down near Addis Ababa after takeoff on March 10—Boeing was optimistic that it could complete the software work in a few weeks.

That work stretched out over three months, then FAA test pilots found

another problem in which computers on the plane could fail. Boeing is still working to correct that issue.

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