

What you need to know if you still need to fly amid global travel chaos

Do not proactively cancel flights yourself. Waiting for the airline to formally do so gives you the best chance of ensuring it remains responsible for re-booking, a refund and other accommodations.

BY STEVEN LEIB

We are now three weeks into the war between the United States, Israel and Iran, which has grown to engulf much of the Middle East. There are few signs the conflict will slow down or stop anytime soon. The situation has upended air travel. Missile and drone strikes have affected major airports, key routes through the Middle East have been shut down and the cost of jet fuel has shot up. For airlines, these factors mean higher operating costs and reduced capacity. For many travellers, that means fewer options and higher prices.

Some travellers may be in a position to revise, delay or cancel upcoming travel plans. But many others who need to fly for work or personal reasons face high costs or may even be considering complex, unorthodox routes.

There are some important implications for how global air travel functions, right now and in the future. But there

are also some general practical tips for ordinary travellers to help navigate the uncertainty.

Jet fuel costs soar

For virtually every airline in the world, fuel and labour represent the two highest costs. Since the beginning of the conflict, severe energy market disruption means the average jet fuel price has nearly doubled, with little indication relief is on the way. And it is possible the global energy market crisis could escalate further, as gas plants and gas fields in Qatar and Iran come under attack.

Right now, because of the increase in fuel prices for many airlines, jet fuel has likely surged to become the number-one cost.

What is happening with airfares?

Unsurprisingly, many major airlines have hiked their international fares significantly. And they may go up further still. Some tickets have appeared at an extraordinarily high price. In essence,



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airlines are trying to identify (typically by analysing your flight searches) the highest price you are willing to pay, so they can sell you a ticket at that price.

In a crisis, some might see this as taking advantage of vulnerable passengers. But airlines could argue the system ensures there is a seat there for someone who desperately needs it. Unfortunately, they rely on the price consumers are willing to pay to demonstrate that level of "need".

Stuck in a holding pattern

More broadly, the conflict has dramatically altered airlines' ability to predict

OTHER GENERAL TIPS

For those who are planning travel in the next couple of months, most carriers based in the Middle East are selling tickets with a reduced flight schedule to accommodate operational restrictions.

But given ongoing uncertainty, these schedules may not be as reliable as passengers would typically expect. Buying flexible fares and travel insurance can help alleviate the effects of travel disruptions. But they introduce added costs.

Airlines may offer fee waivers, free rebooking or penalty-free cancellations.

their costs. That is a problem, because seats are usually for sale up to nearly a year in advance.

Will we see a shift in popular flight routes?

The Middle East is geographically well-positioned to access nearly the entire world with a non-stop flight. It sits at the intersection of several popular international travel corridors, and its airline ownership models typically include government backing. However, if this conflict threatens those advantages in the long term, other airlines may step in, perhaps able to lower their fares over time by boosting their capacity.

Going the longer way around

Airlines based in Asia are particularly well placed to serve Australians travelling to Europe, though high demand for these routes has driven up airfares. Another option is to sequence together multiple tickets on different carriers. This can lower costs and may add an element of "adventure".

However, there are some significant risks that could undo any cost savings. For one, the "extras" can really add up. A sequence of self-organised tickets often means additional expenses for:

- Overnight transits
- Multiple baggage fees
- More meals on the road.
- Travellers should also be mindful of visa requirements in transit countries, and any visa fees that apply.

Crucially, the "do-it-yourself" approach often means you are not protected from the impacts of delays or cancellations across multiple tickets on different airlines.