

GO HERE, NOT THERE



PHOTOS BY DINA MISHEV FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

A funky, crowd-free valley alternative

BY DINA MISHEV

Offering alternatives to overcrowded destinations.

There are many reasons visitors are drawn to **Jackson Hole**: The 40-mile-long valley in northwestern Wyoming is home to the cowboy cosmopolitan town of Jackson, Grand Teton National Park, the Jackson Hole Mountain Resort and the southern entrance to Yellowstone National Park. And there are also many reasons visitors are pushing the summer season into the fall. (Grand Teton National Park experienced an 88 percent increase in visitors in October 2020 compared with 2019; this month is expected to be at least as busy.)

Come fall in Jackson Hole, the elk are bugling, the days are usually still warm enough for hiking, biking and fly-fishing, and the Tetons might be at their finest; the range's base glows gold with the changing aspen trees, while snow dusts its snaggy summits. When you need a break from playing, you can check out the schedule at the Center for the Arts, which draws speakers and artists, including climber Alex Honnold and the company David Dorfman Dance. You can also grab a snack at the James Beard-recognized Persephone Bakery. Shopping includes art galleries that represent nationally renowned artists such as Jane Rosen and Donald Martiny, and boutiques such as Mountain Dandy, stocked with interesting and luxurious home goods from small-batch makers.

Spend the night at the Aman-



TOP: A mountain biker on the uncrowded Horseshoe Canyon trail network, which offers views of the Teton Valley and Teton Range, in the Big Hole Mountains in Idaho. **ABOVE:** Mountain Dandy is one of the urbane boutiques in the Jackson Hole region in Wyoming, about an hour's drive east of the Teton Valley.

gani resort, tucked into the side of a butte about 800 feet above the valley floor, or a room at the new Cloudveil, where the check-in desk is made from a 3,000-pound piece of granite to match the Tetons.

Location: In summer, there are direct daily flights to the Jackson Hole Airport (JAC) from 13 cities, but in October and November, direct flights are limited; the nearest major airport is Salt Lake City Airport, about 280 miles south.

But maybe you want fewer people and free-spirited alpine funk instead of fancy shopping, dining and lodging. **Teton Valley in Idaho**, less than a one-hour

drive west over Teton Pass from Jackson Hole, "has fewer creature comforts and choices for lodging and dining than Jackson Hole, but I love that about it," says Sue Muncaster, founder of the non-profit Slow Food in the Tetons and co-founder of Teton Family magazine. "It is what it is."

A local landmark is a 10-foot-long potato made from chicken wire and stucco over a wooden skeleton. Bolted to a red flatbed truck, the giant potato is a nod to local farmers and also marks the entrance to the 1953 Spud Drive-In, which still shows movies on Fridays and Saturdays. There are only two stoplights in the entire valley, which is about 15 miles wide and twice as long, and home

to about 12,000 people. In even shorter supply than stoplights are fast-food chains and big-box stores. "We don't have either, and the community likes it that way. The pace of life is slower over here [than in Jackson Hole]," says Muncaster, who has lived in both valleys. "And the trails are much less crowded."

Like Jackson Hole, Teton Valley is ringed by mountains — the Tetons to the east and the Big Holes to the west — laced with hundreds of miles of trails. Whether you hike, bike, horseback ride or ski on them depends on the season. You can go for a horseback ride at Linn Canyon Ranch and also try out glamping in one of three canvas-wall tents set up with electricity and furnishings. Horseshoe Canyon is one of the valley's most popular mountain biking areas, and on a recent Friday afternoon, there were five cars at the trailhead. Grand Targhee Resort has about 70 miles of trails, including some that link to the Jedediah Smith Wilderness and Grand Teton National Park; in winter, the lift lines to ski its approximately 2,600 acres of terrain, which gets an annual average of 500 inches of snow, are short (if there are any at all).

Location: The Jackson Hole Airport is about 40 miles away; the Salt Lake City Airport is about 280 miles away.

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Airline service gets an 'N' for 'needs improvement'



The Navigator

CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT

It's been a rough year for air travelers, at least when it comes to customer service. Airlines? Not so much.

America's air carriers have received about \$80 billion in pandemic aid

from the federal government but have faced almost no government penalties for their service lapses.

As of today, the Transportation Department's Office of Aviation Consumer Protection has issued just two fines against major airlines. That puts it on track for 2021 to have the lowest number of enforcements in the agency's history.

So here we are, with 2021 almost done, and a government that seems unwilling to enforce even the most basic of consumer protection rules.

Interestingly, though, it is willing to punish passengers. In August, the Federal Aviation Administration proposed more than \$500,000 in fines against misbehaving passengers, pushing the 2021 total to more than \$1 million. Ironically, one of the passengers on a JetBlue flight faced a \$45,000 fine, which is more than what the airline paid for stranding passengers on the tarmac. (JetBlue was fined \$60,000 but only has to pay about half of that under the terms of the consent order.)

How do you address this imbalance? Ideas include rethinking the way airlines are fined for violating customer service rules, passing new regulations and requiring airlines to improve their training.

One of the most compelling ideas is to abandon the traditional enforcement actions against airlines. Instead, consumer advocates have proposed a novel idea to nudge airlines toward taking better care of their customers.

Say an airline quotes a misleading airfare on its site or is slow to issue refunds. What if instead of threatening it with a fine, the government takes away its ability to take off or land at certain airports? Landing slots, which are permission to operate flights at specific times at busy airports, are worth tens — and sometimes hundreds — of millions of dollars. Losing one could have a meaningful effect on an airline's operation. And the possibility of losing one would provide a powerful incentive to take care of customers.

Local authorities could also confiscate the right to use airport gates as punishment for violating consumer rules. Better still, penalizing airlines in such a way would not require a formal and lengthy enforcement procedure; it could happen quickly and with minimal paperwork.

"Rethinking the way the government enforces consumer regulations could have an almost immediate effect on air travel," says Charles Leocha, president of Travelers United, a Washington consumer advocacy organization.

Aside from government imposition of more effective penalties, what can airlines do to improve the flying experience? They could start by giving air travelers just a few more rights. "It's high time the U.S.

employs similar legal consumer protection as afforded [European Union] residents," says veteran airline analyst Addison Schonland. "In this country, we have virtually no consumer travel protection."

For example, Europe's consumer protection rules establish standards for compensation and assistance to passengers in cases of denied boarding, flight cancellation or extended delays. No such regulations exist in the United States. Schonland and many other aviation insiders say they should.

Those kinds of consumer protections would require an act of Congress. During the last administration, E.U.-style consumer protections didn't have a chance. But they may now. Typically, all it takes is a single news event to focus everyone's attention on the lack of adequate consumer protections — a service meltdown that captures half a news cycle — and American air travelers would be on their way.

There's also common sense. Offer a humane amount of legroom and personal space in economy class. Jettison the fees you know your customers hate. And treat customers with respect, especially when it comes to their masks. Treat passengers as you would want to be treated. And prepare your employees for the pushback from passengers when you don't.

But passengers fear the industry is headed in the wrong direction. Jacqueline Hampton, founder of the travel planning site Portico, says travelers already dread the return of fees. She says airlines ought to keep them reasonable — "something nominal, in the \$10 to \$25 range," she says. Passengers doubt that mask rules will ever get lifted. And they miss the days when airlines welcomed them on board and made them feel special, even in the main cabin.

"Why don't they do fun things that show their warmth?" she says. "What about a surprise raffle every once in a while, where a random seat gets a credit or free snack or an upgrade to a better seat?"

But experts say the airlines shouldn't change too much. Take mask rules, which have been extended until Jan. 18. Although many passengers may want the rules rescinded as soon as possible, that would also increase the chances of air travelers getting infected by the coronavirus.

"The government surely could loosen mask restrictions," says Jeff Galak, associate professor of marketing at Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School of Business. "But in doing so, they would be failing in their mission to keep customers safe."

Even if you give passengers everything they want, it's still going to be a long climb back to the days when passengers looked forward to their flights instead of dreading them. Improved training, better consumer protection rules and new approaches to enforcement aren't a quick fix for the airline industry's service problems. They are, at best, a slow one — with no guarantees of success.

Elliott is a consumer advocate, journalist and co-founder of the advocacy group Travelers United. Email him at chris@elliott.org.

Taking a wintertime trip? Make sure to prepare.

On Mondays at 2 p.m., the Travel section staff hosts Talk About Travel, an online forum for reader questions and comments. The following is an edited excerpt from recent discussions.

Q: We're flying internationally, and it'll be our first flight since the pandemic began. What's the point of checking in early? I always thought checking in meant presenting yourself at the gate or baggage counter. Is there an advantage to doing it the night before and printing your boarding pass before you arrive? Every time I check a bag, the airline staff prints my boarding pass anyway.

A: It's a major timesaver, plus you can pick or change your seats. Some low-fare airlines charge for checking in at the airport. If you are checking bags, you can go to the kiosk and print out your baggage tags; some airlines also let you print them out at home. Then you simply drop off your bags and go to security. If you're only taking carry-ons, you can go

straight to security. In short, you can avoid lining up at the check-in counter and perform many of the preflight functions yourself. — *Andrea Sachs*

Q: I'm going to a Hyatt Jamaican resort two weeks before Christmas. I need travel insurance, but I'm not sure what to get. I have tickets from Southwest Airlines, which I can return for full credit and miles, but the resort reservation isn't paid for and can be canceled 24 hours in advance. I'm concerned about getting the coronavirus and having to find an expensive hotel room during the holiday season — or worse, getting really sick and being evacuated.

A: Virtually all travel insurance, including the less-expensive named-perils variety, covers a medical emergency such as a coronavirus infection. It's the fine print that is sometimes problematic. Read the medical evacuation coverage carefully. Some policies will only transport you to the nearest hospital or the

closest hospital to the United States. If you have concerns about your coverage, consult with your travel adviser about supplementing it with a medical evacuation membership, such as Medjet or Global Rescue. — *Christopher Elliott*

Q: I live in Maryland, and I'm going to Europe on an organized tour in December. I booked flights two days early because of jet lag and to do some touristy stuff before the tour. I have reserved a hiking tour in Yosemite National Park for next summer, and with the recent Southwest Airlines fiasco and cancellations, I think I should book flights a few days early because of that, plus all the recent "air rage" incidents.

A: Very wise idea. I always give myself a cushion in the event of a flight delay or cancellation. I will rarely fly on the same day of my official trip start. — *A.S.*

Q: We were inspired by your recent article and booked a trip

to Paris for the first week in December. Let me know if you have any suggestions for that time of year. I was thinking of a day trip outside the city, but Mont Saint-Michel or Normandy seem like a stretch. Maybe Chartres?

A: Those are all doable. Here are some other day-trip suggestions: visiting Giverny, home of Monet, or Auvers-sur-Oise, where the painter's compatriots found inspiration; taking a castle tour of the Loire Valley; and sipping bubbly in the Champagne region. — *A.S.*

Q: I'm going to Hawaii later this year and am looking for some fun (non-beach) activities for the Big Island. We'll be staying by Kona and are planning a day at the volcano.

A: Besides the observatory, I would recommend a Kona coffee tour, such as the one offered by Greenwell Farms. The hike to the Papakolea Green Sand Beach is also high on my list. It's more of a hike than a beach activity. — *C.E.*

SIGN LANGUAGE



ROLANDO MAYEN

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