Why are flight delays getting worse?

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[00:00:09] **James Rowe:** Flag delays are getting worse. But why?

[00:00:16] **James Rowe:** Hello and welcome to this episode of Witch Shorts. Now, this week I found Kate Paola's piece from the September October issue of witch travel, which analyzed a whole load of data to find out why more flights are being delayed, what's causing them, which airlines are worse than the rest, and crucially explains what more needs to be done.

[00:00:36] **James Rowe:** To keep passengers in the loop. Here's Cage Peace. Adapted for the podcast this week. Read by me, James Rowe.

[00:00:51] **James Rowe:** The taxi turned up, security went smoothly. Passport in hand. You arrive early at the gate because nothing is gonna stand between you and the holiday you've waited all year for. Until the departure board flashes red, your plane is delayed and the waiting game begins. It's not just bad luck. Flight punctuality has gotten worse.

[00:01:12] **James Rowe:** When we check the Civil Aviation Authority data for six of the biggest airlines between May, 2024 and April, 2025, all of them were less punctual now than they were in 2019. But which airlines are the worst for punctuality? While any plane is classed as delayed, if it leaves more than 15 minutes after its scheduled departure.

[00:01:32] **James Rowe:** And according to the data we looked at, TUI was the worst of the six big UK airlines we reviewed with the lowest average percentage of on-time departures. Just 59.2% of flights departed on time. It also had the second highest percentage of delays over three hours after WHI Air. Back in 2018, an average of 70.7 of Tui's departures were on time, but by 2022, that slipped to 42.6%, and although it's improved in recent years, TUI still hasn't fully returned to its pre pandemic level of punctuality.

[00:02:06] **James Rowe:** Second wave of punctuality from May 24 to April 25 was Wiz Air. Its average on-time rate was already as low as 66.8% back in 2019, and by 2023 it had plummeted to 55.6%, but it has now returned to its 2019 levels. It's a similar story for Rhina whose average on time departures were at 77.8% in 2019 and felt a 63% by 2022 only recovered to 66.5% by 24 25.

[00:02:37] **James Rowe:** Even British Airways, which tops our table, has slipped significantly. Its punctuality was at 71.5% in 2019 and as high as 75.8% the air before. But by 24 25, it had fallen to 68.7%, and it's a similar pattern for EasyJet and Jet two. Yes, these figures can't tell the full picture for 2025, but they show that on-time, departures across the board have slipped from 2019 levels.

[00:03:04] **James Rowe:** Ultimately, this means you're more likely to be inconvenienced by delays in 2025 than you were in 2019. But why Ryanair says you should blame air traffic control. The airline even launched a website called Air Traffic Control, ruined your flight, along with a League of delays, claiming to expose the worst ATCs across Europe for delays due to mismanagement and staff shortages from January to.

[00:03:30] **James Rowe:** 2025, but does it stack up well? Euro control, which speaks for the European network, admitted that in some parts of the network, the number of a TC officers is 10 to 20% lower than would be needed to manage the demand. While it said there was no immediate staffing problem in the uk, air traffic control shortages in the network whilst location specific cause delays across the whole airspace adding to the bottlenecks created by high demand alone.

[00:03:57] **James Rowe:** The UK's own air traffic control body Nats told us it's fully staffed and operating normally. However, there are valid concerns that a TC might be encountering a retirement bulge. According to David Avery, national Security for Aviation at Prospect, the Union that represents most air traffic control officers in the uk.

[00:04:19] **James Rowe:** And re recruitment is difficult. He estimates that 40% of those who apply for a job ultimately fail any possible staffing issues are only made worse by other factors, such as certain parts of the airspace being closed off for military or geopolitical reasons. Airport capacity is another problem. Avery says There are physically only so many aircraft that can land and take off.

[00:04:41] **James Rowe:** The only way to address that he says is through national infrastructure decisions, like a third runway at Heathrow, or second at Gatwick. But are the airlines themselves also to blame? While in June this year, air traffic returned to pre pandemic levels for the very first time. And in some cases it's the airline struggling to stay punctual that are putting on a record number of flights.

[00:05:02] **James Rowe:** Take Rhine Air, for example. A load hasn't returned to pre pandemic levels of punctuality. It's scheduled over 162,000 flight in 2024, according to the Civil Aviation authority. It's almost 25,000 more than in 2019. Some airlines claim their delay rates are due to their reluctance to cancel flights. Wiz Air also told us it would rather delay than cancel a flight and that some delays are outside its control.

[00:05:27] **James Rowe:** It told us that it's committing to enhancing the resilience of its operations to minimize cancellations and reduce delays. Two, we said we want to be more punctual, but we also keep our credo to never cancel. EasyJet told us it. Always does all possible to get our customers to their destination on time and minimize any delays despite flying in some of the most congested air space in the world.

[00:05:53] **James Rowe:** Ryan Anne BA meanwhile didn't provide a comment despite increasing flight air on air. The League of Delays tells passengers that the solution is to complain to MPS and ask for greater government investment in a TC, but it would take more than a decade to make a difference. According to John Grant, a travel data provider, OAG, we need more runways, more coordination with Europe and more common European airspace.

[00:06:18] **James Rowe:** They go on, the industry accepts it, will never operate and doesn't want to operate at a hundred percent punctuality. Most people in the industry would accept that an on-time performance of. 80% or above is pretty good. That's four and five flights arriving within 15 minutes of their scheduled arrival time.

[00:06:36] **James Rowe:** But most of the big airlines are currently far from that benchmark. So why do they keep putting more planes in the sky? If you've been delayed, then what are your rights? Well, if you're delayed by more than three hours, you're entitled to compensation. But airlines aren't responsible if the delay wasn't their fault.

[00:06:54] **James Rowe:** For example, those caused by unpredictable weather or crucially delays the claim are caused by a TC. But it can be tricky for passengers to find out exactly why they were delayed. Which can cause thousands of compensation claims to go unmade. A government study in 2021 found that 85% of delayed flights could have been eligible for compensation.

[00:07:17] **James Rowe:** This means it is worth pushing back if an airline refuses to pay out. Perhaps airlines will be proactive about reducing delays only if they affect their profitability. In other words. When the cost of paying out compensation is greater than the cost of taking precautionary measures, and that will only happen when passengers can more easily find clear, accessible, transparent information about the reason for every single delay.

[00:07:47] **James Rowe:** That brings to an end another podcast from which there's loads more for you to read about everything we discuss today. Just head to the episode description for more useful everyday advice. There you'll also find an exclusive offer for podcast listeners like you to become a witch member for 50% off the usual price, giving you access to our product reviews, our app, one-to-one, personalized buying advice, and every issue of which magazine across the air.

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