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Airline plane turnaround time: What airlines do to get their planes flying again quickly

Annabel Fenwick Elliott



Time is money: Airlines need to get planes back in the air as soon as possible after they land. Photo: Rob Homer

When it comes to an airport parking space, time is money. So how long does it take to turn a plane around, from when it lands to when it takes off again? And what needs to happen during the process?

We spoke to legacy airline British Airways as well as low-cost carrier Norwegian to find out.

How long does the process take?

This depends on a number of factors, and budget airlines tend to have faster turnaround times. Ryanair, for example, takes as little as 25 minute to complete the whole process for a short-haul flight. They managed to cut the time dramatically after removing seatback pockets from their aircraft in 2004.

Why? Less time spent cleaning in between flights. It might be annoying for passengers, but it means there's nowhere for them to stuff their rubbish. For British Airways, turnarounds typically take between 50 minutes and an hour on short-haul flights.

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destinations and operates an average of 40 daily departures and arrivals from London Gatwick, the procedure for a long-haul turnaround starts an hour before the aircraft arrives at the gate, and takes around 90 minutes in total. For Air France, according to Aero News TV, the minimum long-haul turnaround time is higher – two and a half hours. ○

So, what's the process?

Before the aircraft lands

The flight planning team will print off the cargo unloading/re-loading plans so that they're ready to descend upon the plane as soon as it lands.

If the next flight has a new crew, these pilots and cabin staff will be awaiting the arrival of the aircraft. Prior to this, the pilots will have already gone through their pre-flight routines including studying the route of travel and weather conditions, while the cabin crew will have confirmed their expected passenger load, and noted any customers requiring extra assistance.



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When the plane arrives

As the aircraft taxis onto stand ground-loaders are on hand to "choc" the aircraft (place stops behind the wheels; this is where the phrase "chocks away" comes from) and connect it to auxiliary power and air-conditioning, so that engine use is minimised.

The loaders then "cone" the aircraft (surround it with cones to protect the wings and engine areas from vehicles that will be servicing the plane), and the turnaround manager connects the air bridge.

As soon as it's safe to do, handlers underneath the wing will start unloading baggage and cargo, as passengers disembark the aircraft. According to Norwegian, it generally takes between 10 and 15 minutes for everyone to get off.

Meanwhile, the cleaning crew will be just behind the last of the passengers, sprucing the cabin up, re-stocking and cleaning the bathrooms, and collecting up all the rubbish. During this time, catering supplies for the next flight will be loaded on.

Underneath the wing, refuelling of the aircraft begins and passenger baggage arrives via two loaders at either end of the aircraft to help speed up the process.

A sizeable team of engineers – Virgin Atlantic has 42 of them



The contents of the loos will be vacuumed into a tank on the back of a truck.

Once the boarding time has been agreed, the outbound pilots and cabin crew will then enter the aircraft and perform their own safety (SEP) and security checks.

The aircraft tug (the vehicle that "pushes back" the aircraft from its stand) arrives ready for when preparations are complete.

Boarding

According to Boeing, for many airlines the largest factor in turnaround time is the passenger boarding process; and as Telegraph Travel has pointed out previously, the way we currently board planes is slower than it needs to be.

According to various studies, from sources as varied as Northwestern University in Illinois and the Discovery Channel's TV series MythBusters, the following simple approach could save airlines – and passengers – up to 20 minutes of runway faffing on every return flight.

Instead of getting passengers to board according to their row, they should board according to their column. Those with a window seat first, followed by those in the middle and, finally, those in the aisle. The "WilMA" method, as it has been dubbed – window, middle, aisle – could cut boarding times by more than 35 per cent, according to Northwestern. Similar savings could be made if WilMA is used to disembark the plane, too, it said.

This could prove lucrative. According to a study conducted on airlines in Europe by AirInsight, for every minute a carrier saves on the ground, operating profit margins increase 0.43 per cent. And according to Boeing, since 1970 the speed at which passengers board planes has actually slowed by more than 50 percent – mainly due to increased passenger carry-on luggage, and what a fiddle it is to stow.

Some airlines have made changes when it comes to boarding in order to accelerate the process, Ryanair – surprise, surprise – being one at the forefront. "Most airlines use air bridges, and customers can only board and disembark through one door, which is a slower process," said a spokesman.

"There are a set of airstairs built into the front of our aircraft, which the crew extend and retract, and we use a wheeled set of airstairs at the rear ensuring we can turn our aircraft around in 25 minutes."

Back to the loading crew's procedure. As passengers board the plane, a "loadsheet" is produced to chart the cargo weight and fuel requirements, and to ensure that luggage is evenly distributed.

Once fuelling has finished, a document is signed confirming that all baggage loaded is accounted for and authorised for travel. The turnaround manager takes a signed copy of the papers from the



Once the aircraft doors are closed, the jet bridge is removed and the tug will push the plane back from the stand so that it can taxi to the runway, then take off. Job done.

The Telegraph, London



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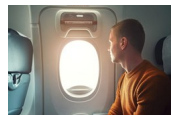
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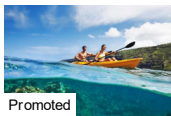
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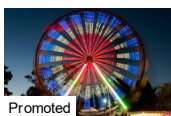
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