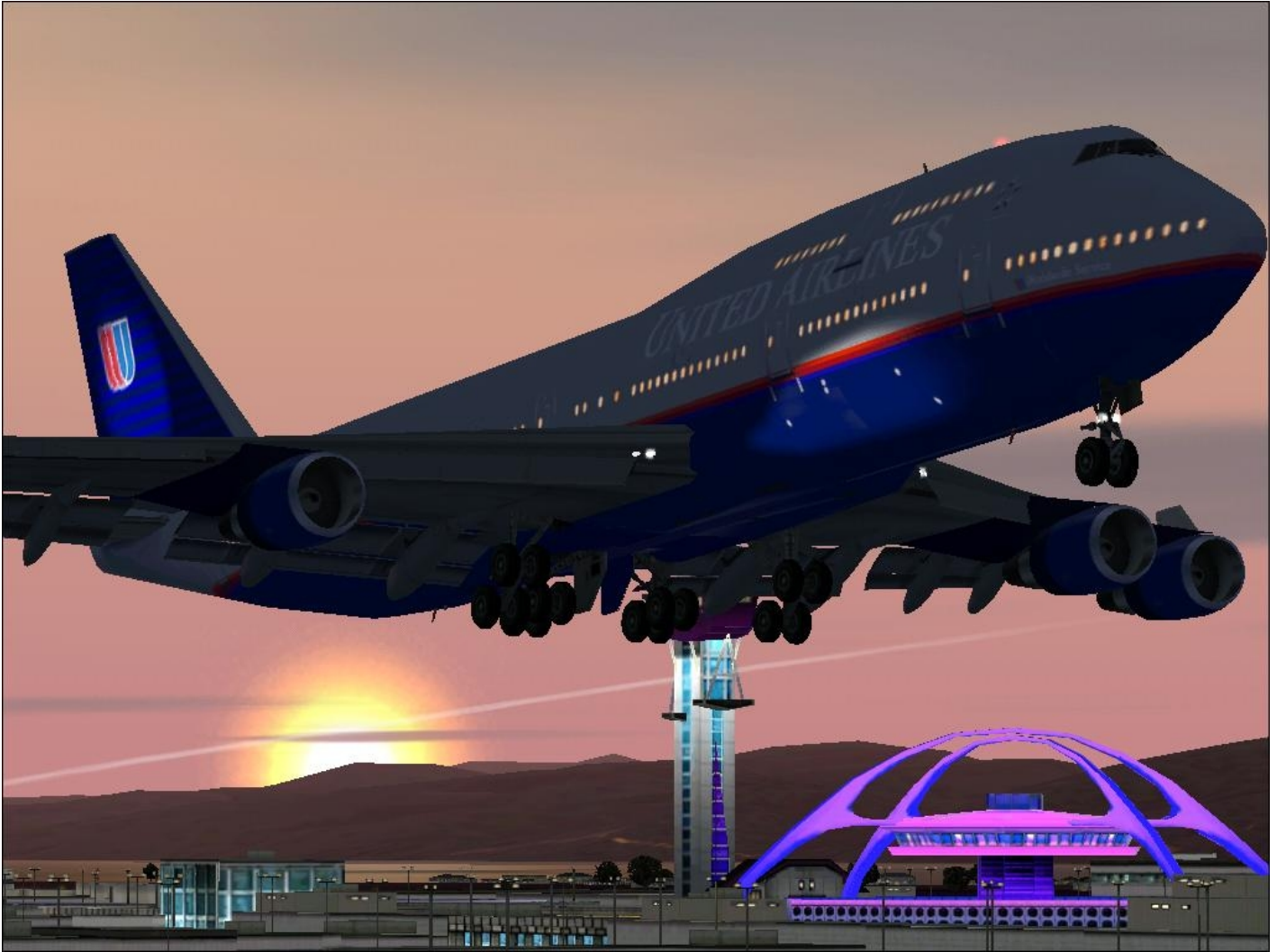




BESET BY TARDY JETS, UNITED REWORKS ROUTES TO GET PLANES ON TIME

News / Airlines



Plagued by persistent delays, United [Airlines](#) will shuffle its route system to improve reliability and reduce its exposure to Mother Nature.

The approach emphasizes "out-and-back" flying, with jets starting at a hub and going to just one city before returning. United will double the number of routes using that system and cut roundabout trips that begin in one base -- say, Denver -- and make multiple stops before ending up in another.

That should help lessen the strain from winter storms, because inclement weather at any individual airport will only affect flying to and from there and won't cascade through United's system, spokesman Rahsaan Johnson said.

United will implement the change in November, a step toward fulfilling new Chief Executive Officer

Oscar Munoz's vow to enhance passengers' experience on the world's second-largest airline. The move was under way before last week's surprise ouster of CEO Jeff Smisek while U.S. investigators probe United's ties to the former chairman of the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey.

Flexibility Lost

"The improvement in on-time performance and improvement in customer satisfaction outweighs any potential cost of the change of aircraft routing," Johnson said. The downside: United loses some flexibility in positioning crews and aircraft.

United has lagged behind Delta Air Lines Inc. and American Airlines Group Inc. in flights arriving within 15 minutes of schedule. It ranked eighth out of 13 U.S.-based carriers in on-time landing rates in the first quarter and 11th of 13 in the second quarter, government data show.

"Simplifying how we move our mainline aircraft around the domestic network minimizes the severity of downline impacts from delays and cancellations," Chicago-based United told employees in a memo Monday. The new arrangement limits any "ripple effect to one route at a time and keeps aircraft closer to maintenance resources and spares."

The document fleshes out comments by a United executive to Reuters in late August that the airline would change the way it schedules U.S. wintertime flights to improve reliability, without elaborating on those changes.

Hopscotch Flying

In the memo, United describes how a single-aisle plane such as an Airbus A320 jet now may start the day flying from Denver to San Jose, California, before going to Houston, Miami and Newark, New Jersey. This fall and winter, a jet may shuttle multiple times on the same day between Chicago and Omaha, Nebraska, and Chicago and Minneapolis-St. Paul, United says.

"Getting you to your destination, on schedule, can make or break your ability to succeed in a work endeavor or to hug a family member at an important moment," Munoz, the former chief operating officer of railroad CSX Corp., said Tuesday in a letter to members of United's frequent-flier program.

Tardy planes are only one of the symptoms of United's struggles to mesh operations since the 2010 merger of former United parent UAL Corp. and Continental Airlines, which created the new United Continental Holdings Inc. The company has been slower to reap financial gains than American and Delta in their tie-ups since 2008 and has been plagued by computer failures, most recently a 2 1/2-hour website shutdown on Sep. 8.

A representative of the Air Line Pilots Association referred to United's new routes in a recent letter to the union's Chicago-based pilots. The letter mentions a new pledge by Delta to beat the reliability of United and American or reward corporate customers with credits for future travel.

"Delta is leading in on-time performance using this scheduling practice," ALPA told pilots. "Delta has also offered their corporate customers rebates if their on-time performance falls behind United and American. United is looking to make Delta pay."

16 SEPTEMBER 2015

SOURCE: BLOOMBERG

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