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Increasingly, It's a Tight Squeeze in the Air



Stewart Cairns for The New York Times

ON THE TARMAC: A passenger boarding a Cape Air flight to Boston in Plattsburgh, N.Y. Regional planes allow airlines to serve smaller cities.

By KEN BELSON
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THEY have less headroom, legroom and elbowroom than wide-body jets, but smaller planes are playing a growing role in American air travel, whether business travelers like it or not.

The New York Times



COMMUTER Richard Reinhardt, a consultant who often flies on smaller planes, at the Memphis airport.

With fewer people flying as the economy has slowed, airlines are increasingly using smaller jets and turboprops known as regional aircraft, or planes with 100 or fewer seats, flown by airlines like American Eagle, United Express, Comair and Pinnacle.

Three-quarters of the airports in the United States are now served entirely by smaller aircraft, according to the [Regional Airline Association](#). The number of passengers on regional aircraft has grown about 40 percent since 2003, and although traffic for all carriers fell in 2008, regional planes still make up half of all flights and carry 23 percent of passengers, according to the association.

“If you’re not in the top 12 hub cities, you’re most likely on a regional jet,” said Rick Seaney, the chief executive of [FareCompare.com](#). “If you’re not in a top 70 city, you’re probably on a prop.”

Smaller planes allow airlines to fly to cities that might not warrant larger planes, particularly in a shrinking economy, or that are unable to accommodate wide-body jets. They also allow airlines to schedule more flights per day because their turnaround time is faster than that of larger jets.

The New York Times

Regional planes “have been a huge benefit for the consumer because it’s one ticket, one Web site visit, you get the frequent flier miles, and you can connect to flights all over the globe,” said Roger Cohen, president of the Regional Airline Association. “In many cases, the R.J.’s are newer” than wide-body jets, he said, and furthermore “they can get into airports that larger airplanes can’t.”

Business travelers like Richard Reinhardt might be less than enthusiastic about flying on smaller planes, but they are learning to cope. A management consultant from Memphis, Mr. Reinhardt, 64, travels two weeks each month, flying to places like Pensacola, Fla.; Joplin, Mo.; and Beaumont, Tex.

Whenever possible he books on Northwest Airlink and other regional carriers that fly nonstop, to avoid changing planes in hubs like Atlanta or Chicago (traveling to some destinations can still require connecting at a hub, regardless of whether you are taking a regional or major carrier).

But smaller planes have disadvantages. They often have only one class of service, even for passengers with a business- or first-class ticket who are connecting to a flight to, say, London.

And as Richard Strauss, president of Strauss Radio Strategies, a public relations firm in Washington, has learned, regional planes often park far from jumbo jets at airports like Washington Dulles International, so connecting with an international flight can more often mean changing terminals. To avoid mishaps, Mr. Strauss, who says he flies about twice a month, tries to leave more time between connections. “If you’re taking a small plane to connect to an international flight, you can miss your flight,” Mr. Strauss said. And standby seats are harder to come by on smaller planes, he added.

Lack of personal space is another problem. “I used to do a lot of work on the plane, but if I’m on a smaller regional jet, you can’t plan on doing any work because you can barely use your arms,” Mr. Reinhardt said.

Aisle seats are a must, he said, adding that “if the person next to you is asking for an extender belt, you want to find another seat.” Mr. Reinhardt also says he sits

The New York Times

in the front of the plane so he does not have to wait, stooped over in the back, for others to disembark.

Storage limitations on smaller aircraft can also contribute to delays. Many airlines have begun charging \$15 or more for checking bags, so more passengers are choosing the carry-on option. But regional flights lack adequate room in the cabin for some of those bags, so passengers must sometimes check them as they board and wait for them on the tarmac or in the jetway after the flight has landed. To avoid these delays, Mr. Reinhardt says, he packs light and uses a collapsible garment bag that just fits in the overhead bins on smaller planes.

Despite these drawbacks, Mr. Reinhardt says he appreciates the fact that regional aircraft allow him to fly nonstop to hard-to-reach places. But flights of more than two hours test his patience.

Indeed, the United Express flight from San Antonio to San Francisco on a regional jet is just under four hours. The [US Airways](#) flight from Memphis to Phoenix, operated by Mesa Air, lasts about 3 hours and 27 minutes. Often, the only way to fly on a larger jet on such routes is to connect through another city, making the trip longer, sometimes much longer.

In fact, regional aircraft are increasingly flying longer trips. In 2008, they flew 461 miles per flight on average, 23 percent farther than they did in 2003, according to the Regional Airline Association.

And those collecting frequent flier points can take advantage of those miles. Through code-sharing agreements, passengers on regional planes accrue mileage just as they do on larger aircraft, although some airlines like American have eliminated the 500-mile minimum award per flight.

When booking travel, flights on regional aircraft are easy to spot. Tickets sold online will include the words “operated by” beside flight details. And “if it’s being operated by an airline you’ve never heard of, it’s a pretty good bet it’s a regional carrier,” said Tom Botts, a partner at Hudson Crossing, a travel industry consultant in New York.

The New York Times

Sometimes choosing between a major and a regional carrier comes down to where you live.

Some fliers, particularly on the East Coast, can choose from several airports. A New Jersey traveler, for instance, could drive to Philadelphia or Newark to catch a flight on a larger jet, if that was a priority.

Most people, though, must decide between flying on a larger plane and flying nonstop. Many business travelers say that avoiding a stopover is the way to go.

“At the end of the day, if I can fly nonstop from La Guardia” to Jacksonville, Fla., “instead of schlepping through Atlanta, I’ll take that any day,” Mr. Botts said.

Still, he said, flying on regional aircraft means that “you do spend a lot of quality time with your arm touching the person next to you.”