

*THE MIDDLE SEAT****The Best of the Biggest U.S. Airports******The first WSJ U.S. Airport Rankings uses 15 metrics to determine which of the 20 largest airports treat travelers better***By [Scott McCartney](#)

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Call it the Mile-High Miracle: Denver International Airport is the best airport in the U.S. in the first-ever Wall Street Journal U.S. Airport Rankings. Once a symbol of high cost and dysfunction, [Denver soared in rankings](#) of reliability, value and convenience.

The rankings scored the 20 largest U.S. air depots in 15 categories, from on-time reliability to [longest walk](#). The rankings are designed to reflect what matters most to travelers, including categories like security-line wait times, Wi-Fi speed, average [Yelp](#) scores for restaurants, average fares, Uber cost to the local convention center, rental-car taxes and fees, number of nonstop destinations and market dominance of the largest airline.

The rankings also relied on an extensive survey of WSJ readers whose input on overall experience, ease of use, security, restaurants, [shopping](#), airline clubs, bathroom cleanliness, electric charging outlets and other categories was graded and scored.

Airports world-wide have come to realize that offering good food turns out to be more profitable than peddling \$10 hot dogs off rolling warmers. Having clean, modern facilities matters, and airports across the country have upped their game significantly. Airports say their own research shows what often matters most isn't dramatic public art or even comfortable seating or power plugs. It's clean bathrooms.

"Most or even all U.S. airports have made huge strides over the past decade," noted reader Bob MacLeod of Orlando, Fla. "I love flying through an airport I have not been to in a while just to see what's new."

In the total rankings of all 15 measures, Denver edged Orlando and Phoenix for the top spot with an overall best score in reliability and strong showings in value and convenience categories.

Orlando, which ranked second among the 20 airports overall, scored best in convenience—walking distance is low, for example. Phoenix, third-best overall, scored second in value behind Seattle-Tacoma International, benefited from a low percentage of canceled flights, short average delay and taxi time for departing aircraft and cheap on-site parking rates.

Two giant hub airports—Atlanta, the world’s busiest, and Dallas-Fort Worth—scored very well in the 15-category WSJ rankings. Big congestion often means big inconvenience and higher cost at airports, but ATL and DFW overcame their size disadvantage. At the bottom of the comprehensive rankings: no surprises. The [three New York-area airports, LaGuardia, Kennedy and Newark](#), sank to the bottom of the list. Among the woes: delays, cancellations, high fares and lousy food.



The top three airports—Denver, Orlando and Phoenix—have one major factor in common: strong competition among airlines. Denver is one of the few airports with three major airlines connecting customers: United, Southwest and Frontier. In Phoenix, American and Southwest compete with connecting hubs. In Orlando, the largest airline, Delta, controls only 28% of passenger traffic.

All three airlines big in Denver compete head-to-head on some routes, and so far, it's working. "Each has found its niche with a different sort of customer, and all three are growing," says Kim Day, chief executive officer at DIA.

Since no airline has more than 50% of Denver's traffic, "no one gets to dominate the discussion and tell us what to do," she notes. That frees airport management to spend on improvements even when airlines might prefer cost-cutting.

Denver, Phoenix and Orlando are all strong business and leisure destinations that benefit from ample airline service and low fares. All three airports spend heavily on improvements. (Airports in the U.S. can charge each departing passenger \$4.50 built into the ticket price. That helps pay for major construction projects.)

Orlando now has a customer-service department that trains all airport employees, from fast-food workers to skycaps to TSA officers, on how to make eye contact, be productive and pick up trash. The airport hands out recognition awards.

"Our challenge is we've got frequent fliers and we've got infrequent fliers and sometimes that's a volatile mix, because the frequent fliers never want to get [stuck waiting] behind the infrequent fliers," says Phillip Brown, CEO of the Greater Orlando Aviation Authority. "We really need to try and figure out better ways to accommodate both."

Journal readers voiced particular fondness of smaller, less-crowded airports, but the rankings focus only on larger airports that dominate travel and together share unique challenges of accommodating 30 million to 100 million passengers a year each.

Among big airports, readers graded Detroit, Minneapolis-St. Paul and Denver highest. Bringing up the rear? New York LaGuardia, Los Angeles, Newark, New York Kennedy and Philadelphia.

Big hubs dominated by a single major airline would seem to be at a disadvantage in the WSJ rankings because they typically suffer from delays and higher fares. But Atlanta, where Delta carries 73% of passengers, and DFW, where American controls 69% of traffic, proved much stronger in other categories than other large hubs.

Atlanta benefits from [Delta's strong reliability](#)—it had the second-best on-time arrivals rate among all airports. Both ATL and DFW have expanded with low-fare carrier competition and spent heavily on refurbishing terminals and improving services. Atlanta, for example, invested in a new Wi-Fi system that scored third-fastest in Ookla's Speedtest for airports conducted January to April this year. Readers praised Atlanta's clean and modern amenities, appreciating the ease of catching flights and making connections even though the airport is the world's busiest. High on the list: food options, efficient underground train service and good airline clubs.

"It is easy to get to parking, terminals and gates, and there is usually a good flow through TSA checkpoints," says reader Thaddeus Roppel of Auburn, Ala. "Ground transportation is reasonably easy to access and the nearby freeway infrastructure makes getting to downtown or suburbs fairly straightforward. If only Atlanta traffic were as well-managed."

DFW has flights to more cities nonstop than any other U.S. airport, the third-lowest average TSA wait time and, after major effort by the airport to boost offerings, the second-highest food ranking. The airport has recently spent \$2 billion updating its three oldest terminals.


But DFW CEO Sean Donohue says sometimes what matters most to travelers are the simple things. The airport made a decision three years ago to spend \$5 million more to raise janitorial wages and the frequency of bathroom cleaning. Another recent

improvement: High-tech glass that helps lower the temperature in terminals on hot Texas days. After installation, sales at one bar doubled.

Reader Jeff Terry scored DFW best in his evaluation. “Shortest car to gate. Most destinations. Great amenities. Many entry points thru security. Good inter-terminal transit. Easy to get to. #1 globally no doubt,” he says.

Inside the Airport Rankings

The Journal has ranked the 20 largest U.S. airports after weighing 14 key factors plus a survey of over 4,800 readers. Below are the overall rankings, as well as their rankings in groups of measurements labeled most reliable, best value and most comfortable. Click on the airport name to see more details.

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WSJ RANK	AIRPORT	OVERALL SCORE ¹	RELIABILITY ²	VALUE ³	CONVENIENCE ⁴
1	Denver (DEN)	70.5	63.5	71	77
2	Orlando (MCO)	68.33	57	77	71
3	Phoenix (PHX)	63.83	80.5	68	43
4	Atlanta (ATL)	58.5	54.5	52	69
5	Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW)	57.5	61	34	77.5
6	Las Vegas (LAS)	56.83	67	71	32.5
7	Seattle-Tacoma (SEA)	52.33	69	32	56
8	Charlotte (CLT)	52	52.5	52	51.5
9	Los Angeles (LAX)	50.83	60	57.5	35
10	Boston (BOS)	49.83	45.5	49	55

Showing 1 to 10 of 20 entries



(1) The average of an airport’s reliability, value and convenience scores. (2) Includes on-time arrival percentage, flight cancellation percentage, average arrival delays, average time between gate departure and takeoff and TSA screening times. (3) Includes domestic fares, market share of airport’s largest airline, cheapest on-site parking rate, car-rental taxes and UberX fare to convention center. (4) Includes Wi-Fi speeds, Yelp restaurant ratings, maximum walking distances, non-stop destinations and a WSJ reader satisfaction score.

The Fare Is Fair

Tourist destinations Las Vegas and Orlando offered the best average domestic ticket prices for the first quarter of 2018.

Lowest average fare

Las Vegas



\$242

Orlando



\$247

Denver



\$299

Miami



\$319

New York LaGuardia



\$320

Source: Bureau of Transportation Statistics