

TRAVEL

Denver: The WSJ Airport Rankings' Rocky Mountain High-Scorer How Denver International Airport, once a laughingstock, got itself right to win top score in the Journal's first survey of the largest 20 U.S. airports

By [Scott McCartney](#)

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Denver International Airport opened in 1995 as perhaps the most hated airport in America. It was isolated on the prairie, miles from the middle of town. It was more than \$2 billion over budget. Per-passenger costs ran so high [Southwest Airlines](#) refused to land there. And its high-tech baggage system didn't work, a lemon that became a national joke.

But recent years have brought remarkable change, and Denver International has grown into one of the most convenient and competitive airports in the world, winning the top spot in the first-ever [Wall Street Journal U.S. Airport Rankings](#).



Denver has plans to expand the space inside Jeppesen devoted to TSA lines. Time through security was one area where the airport scored poorly. PHOTO: GEORGE ROSE/GETTY IMAGES

Denver management worked to reduce costs to lure more airline service, which itself would lower fares and bring in more passengers, enabling the airport to grow. When it opened, airlines had to pay the airport \$16 a passenger. This year, the charge will be below \$11 a passenger, airport CEO Kim Day says.

Southwest returned to Denver in 2006 and has become the second-biggest carrier there behind United, which runs an international hub. Frontier Airlines, based in Denver, adds low-fare service. The airport says about half its traffic is business travel and half vacationers—ideal balance for an airport. Only 35% of passengers make connections in Denver—65% start or end their trip there.

But running an airport is more than just providing gates and terminals for airlines. Passengers spend hours there and want good accommodations. That means enticing food options, comfortable amenities, conveniences like good Wi-Fi, plentiful electrical charging stations, attractive nearby hotels and even entertainment.

Instead of comparing itself with other U.S. airports, Denver started comparing itself with some of the world's leading airports—Tokyo's Narita, Zurich, Seoul's Incheon and others. And it started stealing some of their ideas.

Seven years ago, Denver's airport management shifted its approach from focusing on airlines to focusing on the passenger experience. "It has been the No. 1 thing we talk about, the No. 1 thing we fund," Ms. Day says.

That meant investing several million dollars in a faster Wi-Fi system, adding 10,000 electrical charging outlets at seats, recruiting stores and restaurants, establishing rooms for nursing mothers and speeding up TSA checkpoints any way possible.

"A happy passenger spends more money," Ms. Day says. Per-passenger spending grew to \$12.37 in 2017 from \$10.82 in 2013. The added revenue reduces charges to airlines, making it more attractive for carriers to fly to Denver.

Denver now has convenient light-rail that's 37 minutes to downtown and an on-site luxury Westin hotel. The airport built a public plaza modeled after Munich's airport that has a free pop-up skating rink in the winter and a free 18-hole minigolf course in the summer. (Complimentary skate and putter rentals are available.)

There's more work to do, says Ms. Day, who took over in Denver 10 years ago. The airport recently began a three-year rehab of its main building. The project will shrink check-in areas and expand stores and restaurants. It also will relocate the main TSA checkpoint, which is often now seen as a logjam, to larger space on a new floor.

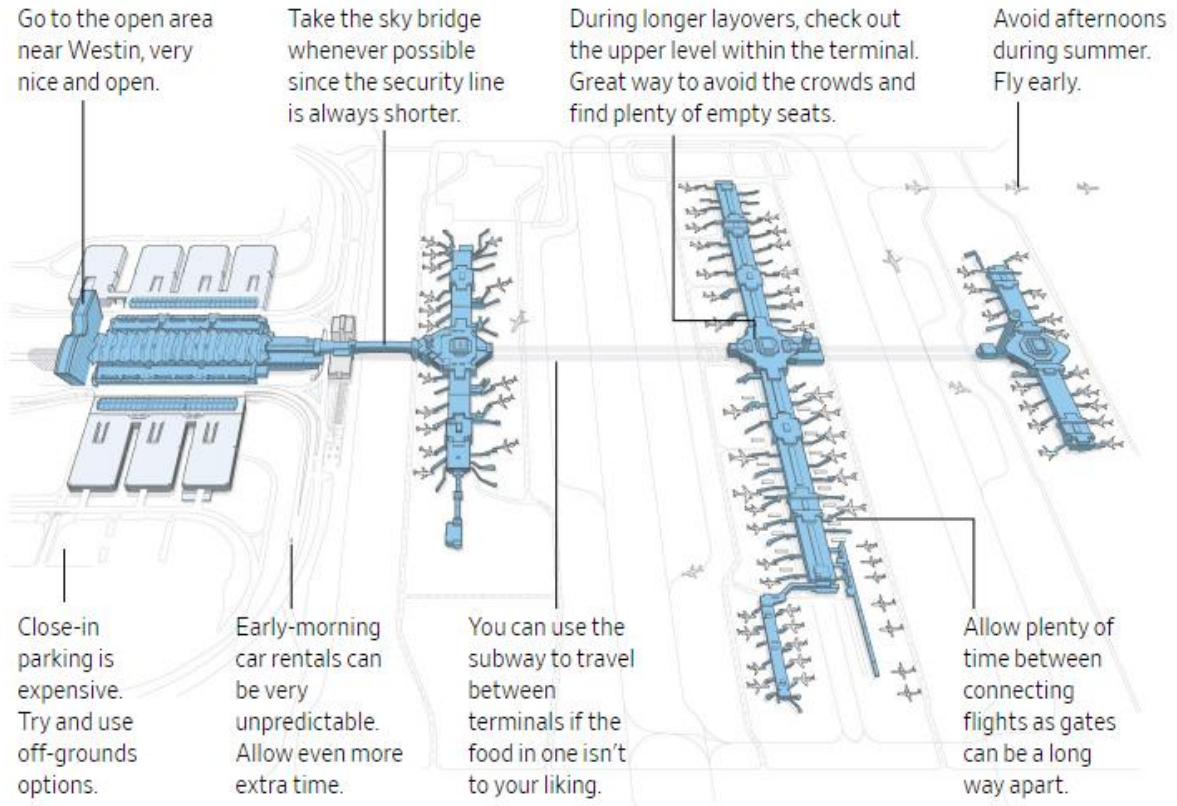
In wait-time data from TSA used in the WSJ rankings, Denver ranked 18th out of the 20 airports, with an average wait of over 8 minutes. Atlanta and Newark were the only airports with longer average screening waits.

Denver has improvements to make on the operations side, especially with winter-storm problems. The biggest factor in flight delays at Denver is deicing. The airport recently added deicing facilities and changed the way aircraft queue for deicing, but hasn't solved the problem. "That's the biggest thing for us to tackle this year. We still have a long way to go," Ms. Day says.

One other big challenge: 84 restrooms to renovate over the next four years. The airport is building mock-ups and letting passengers vote.

The Best and the Rest

Denver International Airport finished first overall in the WSJ ranking. We asked readers to provide tips for handling DEN like a pro. Here we quote some of our favorite bits of advice.



Source: WSJ survey

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

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(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.