

SIMON CALDER - THE MAN WHO PAYS HIS WAY

Greener flights are on way



How will the post-pandemic skies look? For a few years at least, much emptier: economic hardship, new ways of working and fears of the faraway will dull the collective appetite for flying.

During the crisis, the thirstiest jets have flown off to the breaker's yard. A year ago, British Airways was the biggest operator of Boeing 747s, with dozens of 20th-century Jumbo jets; today it has none.

Many of those gas guzzlers were deployed on the route from London Heathrow to New York JFK, which a year ago was the busiest and most lucrative intercontinental air route in the world.

That is why Reading University's Department of Meteorology decided to track every flight on the route between December 2019 and February 2020. Researchers led by Professor Paul Williams compared the flight path of each of those transatlantic trips with the track that best exploited the jetstream – the high-altitude currents of air that swirl from west to east. The team calculated that surfing the jetstream to best effect could cut emissions by up to a sixth.

Passengers and airline accountants benefit, too: the average New York-London flight would touch down 21 minutes earlier, with a commensurate saving in fuel.

So what's stopping them?

Air-traffic control (ATC), that's what. For decades, Nats, the UK's air-traffic provider, and its partner Nav Canada have dispatched transatlantic aircraft according to an "organised track structure". Think of it as a high-altitude highway where everyone must keep to their allotted lane and maintain the assigned speed.

The precise routes available change from day to day depending

on the weather. Airlines can bid for the most economic flight path, but all are suboptimal.

Until now. Barely had I finished the article about the Reading revelations than Nats said it hopes to tear up the restrictions and allow a flying free-for-all.

To be fair to Jacob Young, Manager Operational Performance for Nats, his actual words were: "The dramatic fall in traffic we've seen across the Atlantic has given us a window of opportunity to... introduce things more quickly than might have been possible."

"We're going to disband the organised track structure on days where our ATC supervisors don't believe they are necessary. Airlines will be asked to flight-plan based

entirely on their optimum route, speed and trajectory."

You may loathe aviation. After all, air travel did this: the coronavirus pandemic took hold around the world so quickly because people who were infected with the virus boarded aircraft

and spread it thousands of miles away. You may also regard aircraft as unacceptably damaging to the environment, from the noise and traffic they generate around airports to the carbon emissions they scatter across the skies.

But air travel can also enrich humanity. And this looks like an elegant solution to reduce some of the prodigious damage it causes along the way. THE INDEPENDENT

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The flight path that best exploits the jetstream could cut emissions by up to a sixth





Tail end: British Airways has done away with its gas-guzzling 747s GETTY