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Anxious flyers on LI Experts: Despite recent crashes, aviation low risk

By Newsday Staff/

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This story was reported by John Asbury, Maureen Mullarkey and Nicholas Spangler. It was written by Spangler. A series of high-profile aviation crashes in recent weeks - including a Delta Air Lines jet that flipped Monday at Toronto's Pearson International Airport, causing relatively minor injuries but no fatalities - has set Long Island travelers like Patricia Ferrer on edge.

Ferrer, 66, of Central Islip, said she spent part of a Tuesday flight to Long Island MacArthur Airport from Florida - where she'd attended her niece's baby shower - in prayer and worried over the Toronto crash, the fourth major aviation accident in North America in three weeks.

"When I saw that, I was like, 'Oh, I don't even know if I want to go home,' " Ferrer said. "It's nerve-wracking."

Several bouts of turbulence on her flight to Long Island didn't help.

"Your mind starts going," she added. "You don't know."

Authorities said Tuesday afternoon that all but two of the 21 people on the Delta flight from Minneapolis to Toronto who had been transported to hospitals for injuries had been discharged.

Fatal crashes of commercial planes in the United States are rare, and experts say commercial air travel remains by far the safest mode of transportation in the country, even with more than 10 million scheduled passenger flights each year in U.S. airspace. Flying today still very safe But recent tragedies have brought air safety to the forefront of many people's minds.

On Jan. 29, American Airlines Flight 5342 collided midair with an Army helicopter while coming in for a landing at a Washington, D.C., area airport, killing 67 people.

That crash marked the deadliest U.S. air disaster since 2001, when American Airlines Flight 587 crashed in the Belle Harbor section of Queens - killing 265 people - after taking off from Kennedy Airport bound for the Dominican Republic.

Before Jan. 29, the last major fatal air crash in the United States was in 2009 near Buffalo. Others since Jan. 29 include the crash of a medical transportation plane in Philadelphia on Jan. 31 that killed six people onboard and another person on the ground and the Feb. 6 deadly crash in Alaska of a small commuter plane. The wreckage of that plane was found on sea ice a day later. Authorities said all 10 people who had been onboard were dead.

Last year, an article in the Journal of Air Transport Management from professors at Massachusetts Institute of Technology calculated the death risk per person boarding at one in 13.7 million, with the odds of death for any single person so low that the National Safety Council put them at "too small to calculate."

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MIT professor Arnold Barnett, the corresponding author of the 2024 article, said Tuesday he had analyzed safety data going back to the birth of commercial aviation after World War II.

"If we had now the same rate of accidents and fatalities" that prevailed at that time, "we would have an average of 6,000 deaths a year in aviation over the course of 60 crashes," he said.

Safety improvements from changes in training to technological advances have made the risk of a fatal crash minimal these days, he said.

"When risk gets very close to zero," he said, "basically you have to stop worrying about it, or go crazy."

But for some nervous airline passengers, a risk too small to calculate is not too small to worry about. Anxiety versus actual risk "For the traveling public, we need to separate anxiety and risk. They are not the same thing," said Kristy Kiernan, associate director of the Boeing Center for Aviation and Aerospace Safety at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. "The risk is still extremely low, but that is not enough to make the anxiety low."

Michael Canders, a Farmingdale State College associate professor of aviation and former director of the college's Aviation Center, said National Transportation Safety Board officials would pay close attention in coming months to the cause of the Washington, D.C., and Toronto crashes, both of which involved commercial jets.

"I still contend flying is the safest way to travel, but I understand the proximity of similar accidents can make people concerned or raise questions of these occurrences together," Canders said. "The NTSB needs to look at both of these accidents to find out exactly what happened. There's a general anxiety about why they happened and what caused it."

Nevertheless, he said, "If I had to fly tomorrow, I would. I wouldn't hesitate to get on an airliner with my family."

More than 25 million adults in the United States are affected by extreme fear of flying, according to the Cleveland Clinic. Hofstra University's Phobia and Trauma Clinic is studying the subject and treatments that include exposure therapy through virtual reality.

Kiernan, a former U.S. Coast Guard pilot, said there are some steps the public can take to improve their flying experiences. They include learning the basics of flight operations and obeying the instructions of the flight crew. Safety experts' evaluations Nervous travelers also might take some comfort in the way the aviation industry processes news of an air crash, or string of crashes. While public attention might wane with the next news cycle, "that's not what's experienced inside the industry," she said. "Inside, attention is never supposed to waver."

That means while each crash will generate a voluminous report by the NTSB, safety experts also analyze "a lot more things that happen that don't become accidents," such as near-misses or reasons for concern that pilots or air traffic controllers can report anonymously, Kiernan said.

"The view in aviation is that we're going to learn from each operation and extract as many lessons as we can from every single operation," she added.

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On Tuesday at MacArthur, some travelers said Monday's crash had spurred them to perform an informal cost-benefit analysis before heading to the airport.

"I'm a little worried, I'm sure everybody is, but it's still better than driving a car for two days," said Florida resident Diane Molfese, not long before she boarded a plane to go home.

With AP

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