

Frequently asked questions from our listeners about Sky Harbor
{SHOW MUSIC STARTS}

Maritza: WELCOME TO VALLEY 101, A PODCAST FROM *THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC* AND AZCENTRAL.COM WHERE *WE ANSWER THE QUESTIONS YOU ASK ABOUT METRO PHOENIX*. I'm producer Maritza Dominguez filling in for Kaila White while she enjoys some time off.

{PAUSE}

Maritza: In today's episode we're going to Sky Harbor International Airport, at least virtually. We've gotten a variety of questions from our listeners about Sky harbor. So travel reporter Melissa Yeager partnered with me to answer them.

Maritza: We're answering questions about the safety of flying amid a global pandemic and why Sky harbor doesn't have more international flights.

Maritza: Before we explore those topics ... let's start with this question from Valley 101 listener Gregory Yost.

Gregory: [00:03:19] So this year, J.D. Power had Sky Harbor ranked as number one. And I've seen them consistently ranked high in customer satisfaction. What is it that makes Sky Harbor such a good airport? And why? [00:03:29][10.5]

Maritza: Melissa, take it away.

{outcue show MUSIC}

Melissa: J.D. Power is a marketing research company. You might be familiar with its name because car commercials are always citing J.D. Power ratings for their newest model. But they also rank airport satisfaction.

Melissa: To learn how Sky Harbor got to the top of J.D. Power list, I went straight to the source.

Michael: [00:00:14] My name is Michael Taylor. I'm the practice lead for Travel J.D. Power. [00:00:17][3.2]

Melissa: Michael analyzes travelers' satisfaction and provides improvement recommendations for clients. He's very familiar with the Airport Satisfaction Study.

Michael: [00:00:28] Well, what it is, is that a study we've been doing for about 20 years is a benchmark study of airports and basically looking at the satisfaction that people felt when they experienced near for everything from when they actually leave their house on their way to the airport [00:00:43][14.3]

Melissa: The company compiles a list of about 200 questions ranging from parking to restaurants to cleanliness in order to gauge how the customer feels about their experience at an airport. Not every person answers all the questions but it gives an insight to how a majority of people *rate their* satisfaction.

Melissa: This year was the first year Sky Harbor topped the list for customer satisfaction in the Mega Airports list.

Michael: *[00:01:23] And we have what we call a mega airport category. And that's an airport that does more than 35 million passengers per year, as measured by basically an organization called Airports Council international. [00:01:34][11.9]*

Melissa: Here's where Sky Harbor excelled on this list and brought them to the top.

Michael: *[00:02:47] , it's an easy airport to get into. Easier for airport to park. The TSA experience goes fairly smoothly. The bathrooms are clean. That's one of the key items in the study itself. One of the key measures is how do people feel about the cleanliness, especially these days in the COVID environment [00:03:06][19.2]*

Melissa: Michael has also noticed that travelers are looking for a unique experience out of an airport. He said many times it's the first and last thing someone experiences in a city. So the amenities inside of an airport like restaurants can give a traveler a positive experience.

Michael: *[00:15:48] And then the our data shows there's a high core positive correlation between spending money in the airport and your satisfaction with it. If this goes up positively, the more money you're spending and we're happier with the airport. [00:16:01][12.9]*

Melissa: He said their data showed as people wait for their flight to board they seek out local restaurants or shops selling trinkets that correlate with their location of their visit.

Michael: *[00:21:14] but there are many, many shops are selling things that are specific to Phoenix, Arizona, and that, you know, the great Southwest. And that's what people want. They don't want to have that generic experience any more especially millennials, [00:21:28][13.6]*

Melissa: Since this is the first time Phoenix has topped the JD Power list, I ask what Sky Harbor has to do to stay at the top. Here's what Michael had to say.

Michael: *[00:14:10] accessing the airport and getting around the airports efficiently is probably the area that we would say, look, based on the numbers that we collect. Probably something that PHX needs to focus on to maintain that number one ranking. [00:14:25][15.3]*

Melissa: He also mentioned that Sky Harbor needs to maintain their successes. So there you have it. Sky Harbor ranked number one in customer satisfaction in part because of their cleanliness, TSA efficiency, and for the airport's unique sense of place.

(transitional music)

Melissa: Now onto the second question the Valley 101 team received from a listener. Why doesn't Sky Harbor have more transatlantic flights? I spoke with American Airlines' Brian Znotins (Zin-no-tins) dive into this question.

Brian: [00:01:51] and I am responsible for where we fly, how often and with what airplane is the simplest way to put it. [00:01:56][5.7]

Melissa: American Airlines ... which again Brian works for ... is the largest international carrier and the largest carrier out of Sky Harbor. That means they're best positioned to add transatlantic and transpacific flights out of the airport. In fact back in March 2019, American Airlines began offering daily nonstop flights from Sky Harbor to London Heathrow Airport. It was a joint partnership with British Airways, a U.K. based airline that already served that route.

Brian: [00:06:41] And so given that B.A. was performing well and we share our results with each other because of our partnership, it made sense for American to add a flight at a different time of day so that we can offer different connections in London. But it's added capacity to the gateway in Europe. [00:06:56][15.1]

Melissa: Brian and his team saw the flights in 2019 to London as a success. They were able to fill the planes with passengers. They had even seen enough demand to expand the route to year round flights.

Melissa: The added London flight to Sky Harbor was a sign of the growth for international flights out of Phoenix. I asked Brian what it would take for Phoenix to have more transatlantic flights coming in and out of Sky Harbor International Airport--and why it doesn't have many now.

Brian: [00:03:44] The first is just how many people in that particular city fly to and from Europe or the European city that we're flying to. And then the second is, how many people can we connect in that American point from other destinations in order to help fill the airplane? [00:03:59][15.2]

Melissa: He said it boiled down to geography. Most transatlantic flights leave from Eastern points because there's higher demand from there to European destinations and it is easier to move connecting passengers from West to East. That makes it harder to fill a plane with passengers going to Europe out of Phoenix because you're flying people west to only travel east again. Brian said they about can fill half. So it's more cost effective to connect to different airports.

Melissa: But hope isn't lost for other international flights over the ocean. I often get the question about the future of Asia bound flights, in particular the future of a nonstop flight to Tokyo. I asked Brian if he sees this happening in the near future.

Brian: [00:13:23] *And so it's still a number of years away, but we do think we're best positioned to do that.* [00:13:29][5.7]

Melissa: He said that data shows about 50 passengers a day would go from Phoenix to Tokyo and vice versa. But they would need more to make a profitable route.

Brian: [00:13:47] So there's still a little bit of passenger growth that needs to develop between the two. We need to see some business growth. Most importantly, for the folks who fly in the front cabin on business and in a flatbed seat and are paying a premium to do that, that's very important to us to make one of these flights work. [00:14:05][17.3]

Melissa: So Sky Harbor needs to see more demand for these international flights to European or Asian destinations. And there were signs of that before COVID-19 hit the industry. Brian and his team were looking at the numbers and projections.

Brian: [00:11:13] But where the crisis is done is really rewind history or rewind time. So that demand has now shrunk. And we're not right now, but we're forecasting for twenty, twenty one. Transatlantic demand will probably be every round to 2016 or 2015 levels [00:11:30][16.2]

Melissa: They'll have to wait and see if they get the demand for nonstop services out of Phoenix. While the airline industry has been hit hard, the holiday season is approaching and an increase of travelers is anticipated. I asked Brian how American airlines is preparing for this.

Brian: [00:19:17] And and so we're building our schedules so that we have as much capacity as we can offer as an airline, that we have airplanes operating in those particular periods. And we're actually very optimistic for strong revenue and results then. [00:19:32][15.1]

[15.3]

Melissa: I also wanted to get some insight from public health experts on their tips for folks traveling during the holidays.

(insert transitional music)

Melissa: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention still advises the best way to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is to **stay home**. And the CDC is also advising people not to travel for

Thanksgiving. However some will still need to travel, so to best prepare you on what to expect while traveling I spoke with Kacey Ernst. She's a professor at the University of Arizona in the college of Public health. She is also an infectious disease epidemiologist. She along with her colleagues have closely studied the transmission of the virus.

Kacey: [00:03:20] So just travel in general is not a good idea while we have this increasing level of transmission that's occurring in in general, [00:03:32][12.6]

Melissa: If you are planning to travel, airlines have stepped up their cleaning strategies for planes in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Studies have shown that those methods are effective in eliminating the virus not just in the cabin but also in the flight deck and cargo compartments. Other studies have shown that the filtration systems in planes also do a good job removing the virus.

Kacey: [00:10:08] There was a nice Department of Defense study that was done that showed that I mean, they used mannequins. So it's a little different than real people who are moving around and have variable compliance with masking, et cetera. But they showed that the way the air moves on a plane, it really does provide good, good ventilation. I [00:10:30][21.5]

Melissa: Planes are disinfected using electrostatic sprayers, chemical disinfectants and ultraviolet wands. Kacey did suggest to avoid using the airline bathroom because it is a small tight space.

Kacey: [00:10:38] And so if you enter the laboratory immediately after somebody who was infected, I would I would think that could be a bit of a higher risk issue. [00:10:48][9.9]

Melissa: Kacey was recently faced with the decision of having to fly her daughter back home to Tucson after staying with her grandparents. She prepared her daughter to fly by giving her advice. That included signing up for early boarding so she could get a window seat, wiping down the arm rests and keeping her mask on at all times as advised by airline guidelines.

Melissa: She also told her this...

Kacey: [00:06:24] look, honey, if you have anybody who is not wearing their mask or is being otherwise challenging to public health guidelines, you need to contact the flight attendant immediately and get reseated. Don't confront them directly because those direct confrontations can lead to exchange of respiratory particles. When people get in heated discussions, just try to get reseated, try to get removed. [00:06:50][26.3]

Melissa: Her daughter didn't have to face a situation like that but it is a piece of advice Kacey recommends to other people as well. She also recommends traveling with a comfortable and good quality mask.

Kacey: [00:15:59] You can also really follow the CDC guidelines on the cloth masks, which I think are two two cotton layers and one polypropylene layer. [00:16:09][10.4]

Kacey: [00:16:40] And you want it to be comfortable. You want it to be comfortable, because if it's not, you are going to be tempted to try and lift it up a little bit to breathe or shifted around on your face or something like that. [00:16:52][12.5]

Kacey: [00:16:53] So so comfort is is important, especially if you're going to be traveling and using it for a long duration. [00:17:01][8.6]

[21.1]

Melissa: And while you're waiting to board or pick up your baggage, she suggests to keep distance from crowds when you can. One final tip that she gave us was to limit the amount of flights you take in one trip.

Kacey: [00:14:32] So I think if you are not living in a in a travel hub and there is a direct flight that could take you to your destination maybe in an hour or two's drive away, that's actually going to probably reduce your your exposures because you're going to be on one plane. You're going to be in one airport. Well, two, I guess, on your destination as well. [00:14:55][23.0]

Melissa: This is what Kacey did when her daughter came home. Kacey lives in Tucson but instead of having a connecting flight from Phoenix to Tucson she made the two hour drive to pick her up. This last tip is not something everyone can do but one to keep in mind as you plan your trips during the holiday season.

Melissa: Kacey is hopeful a roll out of COVID-19 vaccines in the next year can get us all back to traveling and back to the people we love.

Kacey [00:22:29] and the thought that they could start rolling out to the general population. And in six, six months or so, it just makes me say, OK, folks, if you have to stay home, it's one holiday season, you have to stay home. Think about the fact that you staying home could potentially reduce transmission and it would allow some family to celebrate next year with their grandparents, their and their uncles, their brothers or sisters, because they didn't contract covid. [00:23:01][32.0]

Melissa: Kacey here is speaking from the perspective that traveling is going to increase social gathering which will increase the possibility of spread of the virus. In an email after our conversation she mentioned that if you're going to stay in our own pod and not engage in social activities, it does reduce some concerns. She also said that quarantining before you leave and after arrive at your destination will help reduce the chances of infection and transmission as well.

Kacey: [00:23:08] And if everything keeps moving forward in that kind of positive direction, I feel like the best advice I can give is, is hunker down. For now. It looks like it's going to get better and. It will help everybody be able to have more happy holidays if we if we can just. Not travel this year, but wait until next year. That's my overall advice. [00:23:35][27.4]

{Show music cue}

Maritza: Hey listeners, it's me Maritza again. Melissa, Thanks for partnering with me on this episode. You've recently been to Sky Harbor. What's the airport looking like right now? And have you seen any new features that travelers should be aware of?

Melissa: I think everyone expects the airport is a ghost town--and while that was true at the beginning of the crisis...it's not true now. The crowds won't be as big as normal but you will encounter crowds.

On your return trip back home to Phoenix you will see increased messaging on COVID-19 and the importance of mask wearing. Governor Doug Ducey announced on November 18th that the Department of Health Services will start working with Arizona's airports to offer on site rapid COVID-19 testing. Check with your health insurance provider if they will cover it and with your HSA or FSA to see if you can pay for it using that account.

Maritza: Make sure to follow along with Melissa's reporting on everything travel related. If listeners want to follow you on twitter where can they find you?

Melissa: i'm at melissa y-e-a-g-r.

Maritza: If you have more questions about how metro Phoenix is changing, submit them to us at valley101.azcentral.com.

Maritza: And as always, thank you for listening to Valley 101, a podcast from *The Arizona Republic* and azcentral.com. See you next week.