

BUSINESS DAY

Layovers That Give Travelers a Break and Hub Cities a Boost

By CHRISTINE NEGRONI JUNE 19, 2017



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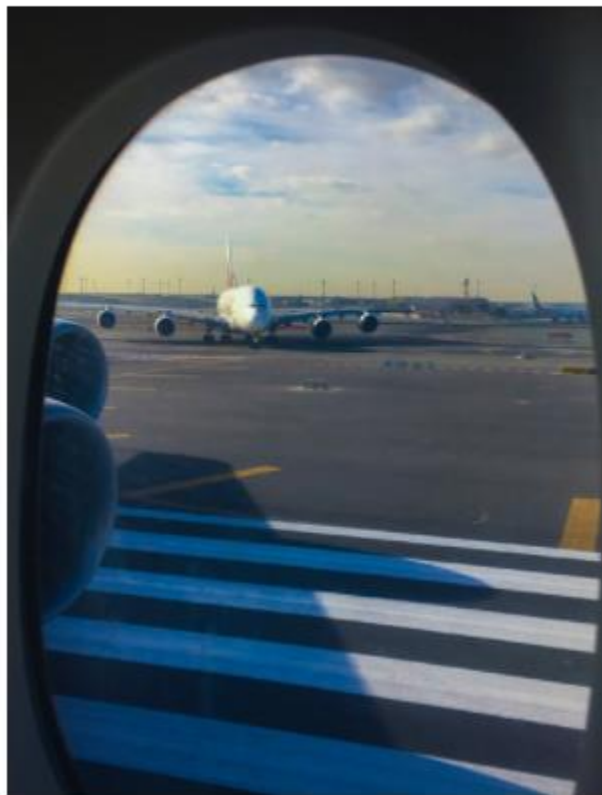
Not long ago, a traveler who mentioned spending a night in [Dubai](#), in the United Arab Emirates, might draw a blank look. [Helsinki](#), Finland; Istanbul; [Reykjavik](#), Iceland; and Seoul, South Korea, elicited similar reactions. Yet now these cities and others have seen tourism skyrocket as airlines have reframed an inconvenient change of planes into an opportunity for travelers to see one place on their way to another.

Nowhere is that better demonstrated than in Iceland, which since the 1960s has been encouraging passengers to enjoy the layover on the way to Continental [Europe](#) by leaving the airport and having a look around. Some airlines allow up to a seven-day stay at no additional charge, though hotels and excursions are extra.

“We’ve been doing stopover promotions through the years, and it’s been successful, but nothing like this,” said Gudmundur Oskarsson, Icelandair’s senior vice president for sales and marketing.

Tourism has increased to 1.75 million in 2016 from 400,000 in 2006 as Icelandair and a newcomer, Wow Air, have opened additional routes from the United States and Canada, offering travelers a cheaper way to Europe than the nonstop competition. The lower airfare comes with a connection at Keflavik International Airport, roughly midway across the Atlantic.

“More people are able to experience Reykjavik,” said Alex Chang, a data scientist with the airfare prediction app Hopper, who noted that airlines are advertising the stopover option on both sides of the Atlantic.



A flight at Dubai International Airport. As long as you're waiting for the next leg of your trip, why not take a desert safari? EyesWideOpen/Getty Images

Other airlines got into the game after watching what happened to Dubai when Emirates Airlines adopted the stopover idea in 2002. Emirates and other airlines in the region benefit from a home base at the midpoint of many global routes.

When the stopover began, 16 million travelers passed through the Dubai airport. By 2016, it was the world's busiest international airport, with 86 million travelers. Today Dubai has become a stand-alone, luxury-oriented destination and Emirates does not always offer the stopover.

Even when it does, the company still makes money by selling city tours, theme park visits and desert safaris through its travel company, Arabian Adventures, which is listed on its website. Because the tour company is part of the Emirates Group, travelers are likely to be reassured that they'll make their onward connection, said Smita Natalia Deans, a spokeswoman for Emirates. The company takes responsibility for making sure its customers get to the airport.

Making stopovers work involves government coordination of visas and other paperwork to ease the way for short-time visitors. "There are a lot of factors that go into building a city like that," Mr. Chang said. "But having people go through Dubai and contribute to the economy is part of the road map, and it's been successful, so that other cities and other countries are looking to replicate that."

Even well-known European capitals now see the advantages of routing travelers through one airport on their way somewhere else. Finnair's location in Helsinki, close to the Arctic Circle, means the airline can offer the shortest flight times between Asia and Europe.

"It's a geographical fact we can benefit from travel between U.S.A. and India because the majority of those routes are flown over Nordic airspace," said Juha Jarvinen, chief commercial officer for Finnair. Last fall, in coordination with Visit Finland, Finnair began a multiday stopover program but also offered excursions as short as five hours, aimed at travelers from the United States bound for Asia.



Helsinki Cathedral, which you could visit while taking a Finnair flight to central Europe.
Ilvy Njiokiktjien for The New York Times

Jay Sorensen, a consultant specializing in airline revenue, explained that in Helsinki and Dubai, the hubs produce long layovers, creating time to fill. “Flying in from the U.S. and connecting to China, their China services leave at night,” he said of Finnair. “There’s no connection until evening, so they have shopping and sauna excursions.”

Since the stopovers began, Finnair has seen an increase in passengers opting to visit Helsinki. Overnight stays in March 2017 were 20 percent higher than in 2016, and 30 percent higher among travelers from the United States, according to Statistics Finland.

While Finnair's sweet spot is connecting Asian travelers and particularly the fast-growing numbers of Chinese who are beginning to travel internationally to Europe, an airline spokeswoman, Päivyt Tallqvist, said stopovers appealed to people of all nationalities who were trying to get the most out of their time away from home. "It makes sense to combine several European destinations on a trip to Europe," she said.

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prompted the airline to add an extra perk in 2016. Passengers could ask to be paired with airline employees who would act as local tour guides during their visit. Hundreds of passengers embraced the program, but looking ahead to the busy summer season, the airline concluded that employees were too valuable to be squiring tourists around town one or two at a time.

At Hopper, Mr. Chang agreed. Compressing a few destinations into one round-trip airline ticket (especially if the stopover city is not well known) is appealing, particularly to younger travelers.

"Look at the way they're marketed," he said. "They're saying, 'Go someplace exotic you might not have experienced before.' They're trying to get at your sense of curiosity."

The success of Icelandair's long-running stopover fare

So the program was suspended indefinitely. Travelers can still stop and explore Iceland on their way to Europe, as they always have, but they'll have to do it on their own.

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