

The Columbus Dispatch

Frontier Airlines launches at Port Columbus



Passengers line up at the gate at Port Columbus waiting to board the first Frontier Airlines flight to Denver on Wednesday morning.

By **Marla Matzer Rose** *The Columbus Dispatch* • Wednesday June 1, 2016 5:17 PM

Frontier Airlines has returned to Port Columbus with a handful of flights to a handful of cities. But airport officials hope the re-entry of the low-cost carrier will create enough competition to hold the line on ticket prices, particularly to its initial destinations: Denver, Las Vegas, Orlando and Philadelphia.

The first flight, which took 150 passengers to Denver, left shortly after 9 a.m. Wednesday, with a water-cannon salute.

Average fares have fallen nationally as well as in Columbus in the past couple of years.

But as airlines have consolidated and Southwest Airlines — Port Columbus' biggest carrier — has become more like the major "legacy" airlines in pursuing business travelers, fares in Columbus have nudged above the national average for the past three years.

The average fare at Columbus Port Columbus was \$378.45 in the fourth quarter of 2015, compared with the national average of \$362.56, federal statistics show.

Columbus airport officials point out that local average doesn't include flights from low-cost carrier Allegiant Air, which operates at the cargo-focused Rickenbacker airport. Like Frontier, Allegiant often is called an ultra low-cost carrier, given that it markets its fares and fees separately and operates less-frequent flights in many cases to keep costs down and planes full.

Frontier has morphed into an ultra low-cost airline in the past couple of years. It previously offered short-lived service from Columbus to Trenton, New Jersey, in 2013 and 2014.

Airlines of this type stimulate new demand among people who otherwise might not travel or who will drive miles out of their way to an airport if they can save significantly on airfare.

Neal and Anna Ressler fit this description. The couple, who reside in suburban Cincinnati, had driven with their two young children to Columbus to fly on Frontier because the carrier's inaugural fares were one-third of what they would have paid to fly out of Cincinnati, they said. The family planned to change airplanes (and airlines) in Denver to continue to Oregon, where Neal Ressler has family.

Frontier also flies in Cincinnati and in Cleveland, but fares and flight times can vary widely market to market.

George Hobic, founder of low-fare website AirfareWatchdog.com, said there definitely is a fare-reducing "Frontier effect" in the markets it services similar to the "Southwest effect" observers have long acknowledged.

"American (Airlines) usually matches them dollar for dollar on some days," Hobic said.

In fact, American is the biggest target for Frontier in seeking to undercut fares from Port Columbus.

Since Southwest stopped flying nonstop to Philadelphia from Columbus several years ago, American has been the only carrier with nonstop service between the cities. As a result, prices have spiked, frequently topping \$450 roundtrip on the route. Elaine Roberts, CEO of the Columbus Regional Airport Authority, said at last month's airport board meeting that she hoped to see Philadelphia fares in particular come down with Frontier's entry into the market.

Frontier, which uses only full-sized Airbus jets, offers an off-peak roundtrip base fare of \$98, or even lower in some instances during a sale.

Frontier says its fares are 78 percent lower on average than the "industry average fare" nonstop from Columbus to Philadelphia. On its other routes, Frontier says its fares are between 47 percent and 58 percent lower on average.

Frontier and other ultra low-cost carriers are often criticized for nickel-and-dime add-on charges, but Hobic said it's often still a better deal if one takes everything into account.

"People should do their homework and compare," he said. "It's often still a super-duper bargain compared with the competition."

Hobic added that Frontier's "The Works" bundle, which for \$49 gives travelers extra legroom, a free checked bag and a refundable fare, is a particularly good deal. He notes that the major airlines only offer refundable fares with their higher-priced tickets, which can cost hundreds of dollars more than coach fares.

Though ultra low cost carriers are known for pulling off routes if they don't prove profitable in the short term, on the flip side, they will continue to add flights if the demand is there. Allegiant has seen strong growth at Rickenbacker, and Frontier has been adding flights at airports it serves.

As it announced its Columbus launch in January, Frontier also said it would be adding additional routes to Los Angeles, San Francisco and two other cities. Adding West Coast flights remains a focus for Port Columbus.