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**FORGET THE SUV - JETS REALLY SUCK DOWN FUEL
JUST A PENNY'S JUMP IN FUEL'S PRICE CAN COST MILLIONS FOR
AIRLINES.**

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Q. Are you getting sticker shock at the pump when filling the plane with jet fuel? How much does jet fuel cost and how many gallons does a jet use on a flight from Los Angeles to New York?

A. Fuel expenses account for roughly 15 percent of a major airline's costs. The industry is still on economically shaky ground and definitely being hurt by higher oil prices, resulting from a combination of factors, including strong demand, OPEC's plan to limit supply and a weak dollar. So far this year, oil prices have climbed steeply. Jet fuel is presently selling at around \$1 per gallon.

To dampen fuel price swings and provide some control over price and supply, airlines normally try to "hedge" fuel, or "lock" fuel prices and take delivery of the fuel sometime in the future.

Hedging contracts are not cheap, and they can be risky. Basically, hedging is an educated guess that future fuel prices will go above the price of the lock-in price.

The "legacy" carriers have been shy on hedging since Sept. 11, 2001. Flight schedule cuts after the attacks left them with excess fuel and little cash to pay for hedging contracts. Low-cost carriers remained in the black and have hedged much of their oil needs.

Southwest, for example, is 80 percent hedged for 2004. American, on the other hand, has only 20 percent of its oil needs hedged for this year, and Northwest, none.

What does a one-cent increase per gallon in jet fuel mean for a carrier like American, the largest in the nation? Last year, American consumed 2.956 billion gallons of jet fuel. A penny increase will jack up fuel costs by \$2.5 million per month. So far, prices are 12 cents higher per gallon compared with last year. Talk about sticker shock.

On an average flight from Los Angeles to New York, a Boeing 767 burns around 50,000 pounds of fuel. Jet fuel weighs about 6.7 pounds per gallon, so that's 7,463 gallons. Pilots

use pounds when discussing fuel because cockpit gauges are in pounds, and pounds are also used for aircraft weight and balance calculations.

Will higher fuel prices mean higher ticket prices? Possibly. Airlines do try to pass some of the additional cost on to passengers. There were 10 attempts to raise fares in 2003, but they all failed.

Some experts now think that higher airfares may start to stick. TheStreet.com, in an article about how airlines are being "poisoned by oil," quotes Morgan Stanley analyst William Greene's comments that "to compensate for a sustained high oil price, we believe there will be a gradual increase in fares."

Q. I've heard the terms "Roger" and "Wilco" used in movies. What do they really mean?

A. Just like in the newspaper business, where inches of "ink" are a valuable commodity, and in broadcast media where people speak in "sound bites," pilots and air traffic controllers use the minimum words necessary to communicate precisely and effectively. Radio traffic can be pretty intense in congested airspace, and entire sentences are reduced to single words or a few short terms. "Roger" means "I have received all of your last transmission." "Wilco" is "I have received your message, understand it and will comply with it."

Q. What is the longest scheduled nonstop flight? How about the shortest?

A. Let's start with the shortest. According to the Official Airline Guide, the route operated by Loganair for British Airways, linking the Scottish Islands of Westray and Papa Westray (see www.westraypapawestray.com/getting_to_westray.html) has a scheduled flight time of two (yes, that's two) minutes. It's flown by a Britten-Norman Islander, a high-wing propeller plane that can hold nine passengers.

The newly set record for the longest regularly scheduled nonstop flight goes to Singapore Airlines. Its Airbus A340-500, called the "A345" for short, lifted off from Los Angeles International on Feb. 3, 2004, and touched down at Singapore's Changi Airport 18 hours and 15 minutes later, after having flown 9,298 miles.

On the shortest flight, there is no cabin crew and no beverage service, as even water needs three minutes to boil.

The cabin crew on the longest flight - 14 flight attendants - walked the aisles more than 200 times and served three full meals. They took rest breaks in an under-floor crew deck at the rear of the aircraft.

The Britten-Norman Islander can be flown by one pilot. But the A345 requires an "augmented" crew of two captains and two co-pilots for such a long flight.

Cockpit crewmembers take turns at the controls and have scheduled off-duty rest periods lasting about five hours. There is a forward crew rest area, with bunks, for the pilots.

Singapore Airlines and Airbus went to great lengths to make the 18 hours feel more like two minutes and less like 18 days for the passengers. The A345 features a slew of innovative amenities and was designed to provide an "environment conducive to feeling a sense of control," said James Boyd, a Singapore Air spokesman.

The focus is on "promoting healthy air travel" for this ultra-long-haul service, with increased passenger space, including an actual "place to go."

There are separate lounge areas for economy and business classes, more than 250 on-demand entertainment options, and new seat designs. The A345 can hold 313 passengers, but this one is only configured for 181, with 64 in business class and 117 in economy.

Pauwels is on extended medical leave and not actively flying the line. She will continue writing From the Cockpit for the Travel section.