

# Miami Herald

## Storm-related travel headaches pile up, even in South Florida

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GREATER FORT LAUDERDALE CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

As the Northeast shivered and came to a snowstorm-related standstill early Friday, travelers trying to get out of South Florida scrambled — and, in some cases, settled in.

"I've been here two hours," said Joe Tamburro, a grocery executive from Toronto trying to find a plane to take him home after American canceled his connecting flight in New York. About 30 people stood in a rebooking line ahead of him at Miami International Airport, but at least 200 queued behind him, too. As he inched his pile of luggage toward the ticket counter, Tamburro shared his low expectations for a quick return.

"I called American and they said the earliest I can get out is Monday," he said.

Throughout the nation, airlines canceled more than 2,000 flights on Friday after the storm system dumped nearly 18 inches of snow in Boston, six inches in New York City and nine inches in Philadelphia. That follows 2,300 canceled flights on Thursday. More travel woes likely await with another storm expected to bring snow this weekend to the Rockies, parts of the Midwest and Great Lakes.

William Talbert III, president and CEO of the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, said local tourism promoters were pleased with the chilly weather up north and conditions that kept visitors in Miami longer – but not so much with the temporary closure of JFK airport in New York.

“We like cold weather in the Northeast markets, but since 97 percent of our tourists come by air, when airports close that’s not a good thing,” he said.

While the snowfall all but stopped by Friday morning in the hard-hit Philadelphia-to-Boston corridor and many highways and streets were soon cleared and reopened, temperatures hovered in the single digits and teens, and wind-chills made the air feel like it was well below zero.

To make matters worse, officials from the upper Midwest to New England are preparing for another arctic blast in the next few days that could be even more brutal.

Friday afternoon, airports around the country tried to resume normal operations as the weather cleared. Miami International Airport saw 42 weather-related cancellations. By 4 p.m., Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport reported the cancellation of 40 arrivals and 27 departing flights.

One of those was David Mari’s flight from Fort Lauderdale to Kansas City, Missouri via Nashville. After showing up early Friday morning and standing in one line for hours – only to be told near the front to switch to a new queue— he found a nonstop flight online “and literally got the last seat.”

“It’s been interesting,” said the 25-year-old medical school student in a phone interview from the airport as he awaited his afternoon flight. “Luckily, I made the right moves.”

Mari, who had been visiting family in Pembroke Pines for the holidays, even created a Twitter account Friday so he could share his concerns with Southwest Airlines. While he got no response on social media, the airline’s website showed his flight eventually took off. The forecast for his destination: More wintry weather this weekend.

“It’s supposed to be a pretty good snowstorm on Saturday night,” he said. “That’s why I was really determined to go home today.”

Temperatures in the Northeast are expected to rise above freezing over the weekend before the arrival of another blast of frigid air already affecting the Midwest.

In a stroke of lucky timing, the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention & Visitors Bureau unveiled its beachy billboard in New York's Times Square Friday. The images, which say "bye bye chilly" and "the beach looks good on you," kick off a January blitz that will include rickshaw wraps, a display at JFK and a tropical event at Grand Central Terminal's Vanderbilt Hall.

The Florida Keys will start temperature-triggered marketing campaigns next week in cities including New York, Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia that activate when the mercury falls below 32 degrees. Digital banners will automatically post on hundreds of news, travel and other websites when weather conditions are right.

In South Florida Friday, where the high barely tapped 70 and the forecast called for high 70s on Saturday, conditions seemed pretty prime to tourism boosters.

"This is one of the only places in the U.S. today where being stuck for a day or so is as good as it gets," said Nicki Grossman, president of Broward's tourism bureau, in an email.

Steven Marin, owner of hotels near the airports in Miami and Fort Lauderdale, said that even though many guests had to scramble for accommodations because they were unable to depart Friday, people didn't seem too bothered.

"They want to get home, but you know what? It's 70 degrees and clear skies today," he said. "They're loving it. Sounds like they're not able to get back to work, but there's worse places they could be."

Marin said the Comfort Suites and Days Inn near Miami International Airport and Quality Inn and Suites in Broward were working with guests and online travel agencies to make sure everyone had a place to stay during an already busy travel season in South Florida.

"People can't get out of where they're trying to leave from and people can't get to where they're trying to go," he said. "It's a mess."

Victor Borges, 19, and about 30 other Brazilian teenagers spread out on the floor of MIA would probably agree.

Surrounded by luggage, empty Pizza Hut personal-pizza boxes and half-full soda bottles, the teens from the youth group Immersion System seemed ready for a long winter's stay in Miami. The group's size made it even harder to find replacement seats once American canceled their Thursday night

flight to New York, where they planned to start a U.S. tour.

Early Friday, Borges said the group was approaching their 18th hour in Miami, including an unplanned hotel stay, and no tickets in sight.

"We only planned two hours in Miami," he said.

*THIS REPORT WAS SUPPLEMENTED WITH INFORMATION FROM THE ASSOCIATED PRESS.*