

served 52 destinations with more than 575 daily flights.¹⁴ Even though an increasing number of critics forecasted growing pains for JetBlue after its meteoric rise, the love affair between the upstart airline and its faithful customers appeared to be as strong as ever.

THE PERFECT STORM

Valentine's Day 2007 got off to an inauspicious start in the New York metropolitan area. Bleak, gray skies blanketed the region, and weather forecasters warned of a wintry mix of precipitation. JetBlue officials at JFK International Airport gambled that temperatures would warm up enough to change the snowfall and icy slush into rain. Six JetBlue planes—four bound for domestic destinations, one headed for Aruba, and another for Cancun, Mexico—were loaded early in the day with passengers, luggage, and cargo. The planes pushed back from their respective gates and waited for word of a break in the storm. Meanwhile, several inbound flights landed, taxied, and filled most of the airline's dedicated gates.

With no end to the freezing rain in sight, JetBlue and airport officials hatched a plan to allow planes stranded on the tarmac to ferry back and forth to the few remaining open gates for offloading. This strategy failed, however, when the runway equipment used to tow the planes froze to the ground. As a JetBlue spokesperson would explain to a local newspaper: "We had planes on the runways, planes arriving, and planes at all our gates. . . . We ended up with gridlock."¹⁵

Meanwhile, almost all of the other airlines operating at JFK had called off their flights earlier in the day. Scores of JetBlue passengers in the terminal waited in vain to board flights that would inevitably be cancelled. "We thought

there would be these windows of opportunities to get planes off the ground, and we were relying on those weather forecasts," said Sebastian White, a corporate communications manager at JetBlue.¹⁶ Freezing rain continued to fall, entombing hundreds of passengers inside JetBlue planes that were stranded on the runways at JFK. The worst, however, was yet to come.

ON THIN ICE

Deteriorating weather conditions at JFK and flaring tempers both inside JetBlue's terminal and aboard its planes exacerbated the company's crisis. Nine of the airline's jets sat idle on the tarmac for more than six hours before passengers were successfully offloaded and taken to the terminal.¹⁷ Passengers aboard one JetBlue flight that landed at the airport were trapped inside the plane for a full nine hours.

Tensions inside the planes ran high during the seemingly interminable ground delays. The airline's pilots tried to provide frequent updates and apologies, while crew members in the cabins did their best to appease restless customers with snacks and beverages. It was not until 3:00 p.m. on Valentine's Day that JetBlue officials at JFK finally called the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to request buses that the airline could use to shuttle passengers from the stranded planes back to the terminal.¹⁸

The crisis took a particularly troubling turn at Newark Liberty International Airport on February 15. Several passengers became unruly upon learning of additional flight cancellations, prompting JetBlue ticketing personnel to call in the police for protection.¹⁹

¹⁴ "JetBlue Airways Names Dave Barger President and Chief Executive Officer," May 10, 2007, <http://investor.jetblue.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=131045&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=998672&high-light=>.

¹⁵ A. Strickler, "Stormy Weather: Waiting til They're Blue; JetBlue Passengers Stranded on Planes for Hours Amid Icy Snarl at JFK Gates," *New York Newsday*, February 15, 2007, p. A5.

¹⁶ S. White, personal interview, November 29, 2007.

¹⁷ J. Bailey, "Long Delays Hurt Image of JetBlue," *The New York Times*, February 17, 2007, p. C1.

¹⁸ J. Chung and A. Strickler, "A Labyrinth of Luggage as Travelers Search through Mounds of Baggage; JetBlue Cancels Hundreds of Weekend Flights," *Newsday*, February 18, 2007, p. A3.

¹⁹ J. Lee, "JetBlue Flight Snarls Continue," *The New York Times*, February 16, 2007, p. 7.