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HEADLINE: Fliers Already Peg 2005 As the Year of Gritted Teeth

BYLINE: By Joe **Sharkey**

BODY:

FREQUENT fliers' reviews of air travel in 2005 are in. They are not good.

"Would rather take a donkey," one says.

" 'Good service' translates to, 'We won't bother you if you don't bother us,' " another says.

"Need air marshals to protect passengers from crew," says another.

These are among the comments in a new assessment of airline travel by Zagat Survey, the company best known for consumer reviews of restaurants and hotels.

Every business traveler knows that air service has deteriorated as major airlines have struggled for survival against low-cost competition and, in the last year, the soaring price of fuel. But even the experts say they're surprised at the virulence of dissatisfaction this year.

"I had expected it would be bad, but not this bad," Tim Zagat, the co-founder and chief executive of Zagat Survey, said yesterday. "Consumers are really fed up by the way they're being treated, particularly by the major airlines." He added. "One of the reasons JetBlue does so well is that they seem to be reasonably customer-friendly."

The survey -- the first air-travel review by Zagat since 2001 -- is based on responses from more than 5,000 frequent fliers and travel-industry professionals assessing service on 22 domestic and 55 international airlines.

You can read the full survey at www.Zagat.com.

Basically, it says that passengers think the major domestic airlines are "a mess," as a Zagat summary puts it. The big complaints are delays and cancellations, cramped seating, and overall poor in-flight service.

Only 2 percent of passengers complained about airline food, but that's probably because in-flight meals in coach class have pretty much gone the way of stewardesses in white gloves. "Airline food is an oxymoron," as one

respondent put it.

The only major airline to rank in the top 10 was Continental Airlines, which came in ninth and which, incidentally, is the only airline still serving traditional in-flight meals in coach. Across the board, foreign carriers were rated far more favorably than domestic ones, especially for business-class and first-class service.

I've recently been focusing on transcontinental premium service. But the stinging comments in the Zagat Survey are a reminder that most business travelers fly domestic coach, and for many of these frequent fliers, 2005 has been a true *annus horribilis*.

Take William A. Allen III, 57, a management consultant who is typically on the road five days a week. This year has been by far the most arduous in his 27 consecutive years of steady business travel, he said in a phone interview.

"I can't get off the road. I'm stuck. I love my work, but it's become a war zone out here, and it's got markedly worse in the last year," he said, singling out airlines -- not hotels -- as the problem.

The biggest issues he sees: delays and route cutbacks, closely followed by unfriendly and sometimes surly service. Mr. Allen said he understood the plight of many airline employees who have had their salaries cut and their career paths blocked. But that's not the fault of passengers, he said.

"In general nobody cares, not at any level," he said. "This is imbued into the entire culture of the airline business." Airline employees, whether on the phone, at the gate or in flight, are too often unpleasant, he said. In many cases, "it comes across clearly that you're a nuisance to them," he said.

Mr. Allen, who is married with two young children, usually leaves his Raleigh, N.C., home Sunday afternoons and returns "between 5 and 8 p.m." Fridays, he said. His current client work requires him to spend the week in Columbus, Ohio.

"It's only 361 miles from Raleigh to Columbus," he said. "I'm leaving home at 3 in the afternoon on Sunday and getting to Columbus at 11:15 or 11:30 at night because the flight is never on time. So I'm in transit for over eight and a half hours. I could almost drive it in that time. Plus the fare on the route has nearly doubled in a year."

He fondly remembers the days when life on the road was marked by "real conviviality" among business travelers on planes and at airports, he added. Now people -- himself included -- "are folded into themselves" and isolated with earphones, he said. "People generally don't talk to each other anymore on the road. We avoid each other because we're all gritting our teeth."

So that's the way it looks from the domestic business-travel trenches. Expectations have definitely been lowered as the year nears a close.

As Mr. Zagat put it, "Today, most people consider just getting there to be the only remaining value in air travel."

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GRAPHIC: Drawing (Drawing by Chris Gash)

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