

85% of Disrupted Passengers Never Complain — Even as Europe's Heatwaves Keep Disrupting Flights

85% of disrupted flight passengers never complain, even as Europe faces its third heatwave of 2026 and fresh waves of delays and cancellations.

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Europe is in the grip of its third major heatwave of 2026, with temperatures forecast to reach the low-to-mid 40s°C across Spain, Portugal, and France this week — following record-breaking heat in late May and late June, both linked to widespread flight disruption. New data shows a mixed picture for air passengers this summer: network-wide delays have fallen sharply year-on-year, even as extreme heat, strikes, and capacity pressures continue to disrupt individual airports and airlines.

According to EUROCONTROL's Network Operations Report for May 2026, the European air traffic network recorded 1,933,830 minutes of total ATFM (Air Traffic Flow Management) delay during the month — a 23.7% decrease compared with May 2025. Network-wide arrival punctuality improved to 79.1%, up 1.7 percentage points year-on-year, while departure punctuality rose to 75.0%, up 2.3 points. The average en-route delay per flight fell to 1.40 minutes, down from 1.62 minutes a year earlier.

Despite the overall improvement, en-route ATC capacity remained the single largest cause of delay across the network, even as it too improved, falling 16.0% compared with the same month last year.

Strikes and Weather Still Disrupting Individual Airports

The month-on-month improvement masks a series of high-profile disruptions that hit specific airports and airlines hard:



A photograph of a Heathrow Departures Board. The board is a large digital display showing flight information. It has a black background with yellow and white text. The title 'HEATHROW DEPARTURES' is at the top in yellow. Below it is a table with five columns: Time, Flight, Destination, Gate, and Status. The table lists several flights with their respective times, flight numbers, destinations, gates, and statuses. The board is located in an airport terminal, with other signs and people visible in the background.

Time	Flight	Destination	Gate	Status
06:45	BA456	AMSTERDAM	A12	BOARDING
07:00	LH911	FRANKFURT	B08	DELAYED 45 MIN
07:15	AF1681	PARIS CHARLES DE GAULLE	A18	ON TIME
07:30	IB3165	MADRID	C04	CANCELLED
07:40	KL1008	AMSTERDAM	A09	ON TIME
08:00	AZ213	MILAN LINATE	B15	DELAYED 20 MIN
08:10	TP1352	LISBON	C11	BOARDING
08:25	OS462	VIENNA	B21	ON TIME
08:40	SK502	COPENHAGEN	A07	ON TIME
08:55	AY1332	HELSINKI	C19	CANCELLED
09:10	LO286	WARSAW	B17	ON TIME
09:25	SN2104	BRUSSELS	A05	FINAL CALL

Heathrow departures board

On 21 May 2026, the first day of a record-breaking European heatwave (confirmed by Copernicus), weather-related restrictions triggered 1,391 delays and 62 cancellations across Europe in a single day — 1,453 disrupted flights in total. Worst-hit hubs included Amsterdam Schiphol, Barcelona, Rome Fiumicino, Copenhagen, Oslo, and Stockholm, with knock-on disruption at British Airways, SAS, Norwegian, Austrian Airlines, and Icelandair. That was the first of three major European heatwaves in 2026 — a second struck in late June, and a third is building now, in mid-July, with Iberia and southern France again forecast into the low-to-mid 40s°C. Each has coincided with elevated flight disruption. Because heat- and weather-related disruption is typically treated as an "extraordinary circumstance," EC261/UK261 compensation is unlikely to apply in most cases — though affected passengers remain entitled to care, rerouting, or a refund. Barcelona's air traffic control centre was among the network's largest single contributors to delay across May. Weather-related factors were the leading cause of en-route delay across the network overall, accounting for roughly 47% of all en-route ATFM delay minutes, with France and Germany hardest-hit.

Passengers travelling through UK airports were not immune. CAA punctuality data for April 2026 — the most recent full month published for UK airports — shows individual routes hit hard: at Birmingham Airport alone, the majority of scheduled Lufthansa services to Frankfurt and Munich were cancelled, reflecting wider strain across Lufthansa's German network.

London Heathrow remained one of Europe's busiest airports throughout the period, ranking 5th by daily traffic with over 1,300 flights per day.

A Strong Start to the Year for UK Aviation

The disruption comes against a backdrop of record UK aviation demand. More than 61.4 million passengers travelled through UK airports in the first quarter of 2026 alone — the highest-ever Q1 on record, up 2% year-on-year, with growth driven largely by short-haul European travel. Load factors also rose to 79%, meaning aircraft are flying fuller, with less spare capacity to absorb disruption when it happens. This builds on 2025's record 302 million UK passengers overall, and the CAA's own Consumer Survey found 31% of people plan to fly even more in 2026, rising to 47% among 18–34 year-olds.

The CAA's Aviation Consumer Survey, published February 2026, found 62% of UK travellers had flown in the past year, with 88% reporting overall satisfaction — the highest level since tracking began in 2016. Yet of those who experienced disruption, only 15% went on to make a formal complaint — and just 72% of those who did were satisfied with how it was handled.

That gap between disruption and resolution remains one of the most persistent frustrations for

air passengers, and continues to fuel demand for clearer guidance on rights under UK261 and EU261.

"It's disappointing that so few passengers who experience disruption go on to complain, when so many of them may be entitled to compensation they never claim," said Steve Reid, Marketing Director at Air Travel Claim. "Even with complaint satisfaction improving, an 85% non-complaint rate suggests passengers either don't know their rights, or don't feel it's worth the effort to pursue them. Given how much disruption we're still seeing across the network this year, that's a lot of people potentially missing out on money they're owed."

What This Means for Passengers

Fewer network-wide delay minutes and improved punctuality is good news — but it doesn't guarantee an individual flight runs on time. Strikes, localised weather, and airline-specific issues (as seen with Lufthansa) can still cause severe disruption on particular routes, even in a month when the network overall performs better than a year before.

Passengers affected by delays of three hours or more, cancellations, or denied boarding on flights departing the UK or EU (or arriving in the EU on an EU carrier) may still be entitled to compensation under UK261 or EU261, regardless of the network's overall performance that month.

About This Data

Figures are drawn from EUROCONTROL's Network Operations Report and European Aviation Overview (May 2026), AirHelp's disruption tracking for 21 May 2026, the Copernicus Climate Change Service's analysis of the May 2026 European heatwave, CAA monthly punctuality statistics (April 2026), and the CAA's Aviation Consumer Survey (published via caa.co.uk/newsroom, 9 February 2026) — the latest editions available at time of writing. CAA's Q2 2026 Aviation Trends report and May 2026 punctuality data were not yet published and are expected in July–August 2026; this release will be updated once available.

About Air Travel Claim:

Air Travel Claim helps UK and EU air passengers understand and pursue compensation for flight delays, cancellations, and denied boarding under UK261 and EU261 regulations. Learn more at airtravelclaim.com.

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