Summer Tips for Flight Planning in Europe

Kateřina Michalská
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Summer in Europe often means one thing: **traffic – and lots of it.**

Eurocontrol keeps the system moving, but it can feel complex, especially when delays mount and regulations interfere with your plans.

The good news? A few smart moves can make a big difference. This guide breaks down what matters most: the tools, timing, and habits that help your flight operate on time.

For Dispatchers: Plan It Right

Keep Your EOBTs Accurate

Your Estimated Off-Block Time (EOBT) is what anchors your flight in the network. It tells the system when you plan to be ready for pushback, and everything from slot allocation to airspace planning builds on that. **If the EOBT is outdated, your flight might get an unrealistic Calculated Take-Off Time (CTOT) or even be suspended.**

A CTOT is a take-off window assigned based on current traffic demand. It's valid from -5 to +10 minutes around the assigned time. **You must take off within that window.**

Some operators hesitate to update the EOBT, thinking it could make the CTOT worse. In fact, the system often improves the slot within a few minutes when fresh data is provided.

Tip: If a new CTOT looks worse, give it 10 minutes to settle. If there's still no improvement, then it's time to contact e-Helpdesk.

Don't File YO-YO Profiles

Trying to dodge flow restrictions with **unusual altitude changes (like FL360 → FL320 → FL360) only confuses the system**. These so-called "YO-YO" profiles increase workload for ATC and can cause downstream problems. Use tools like NMP Flight to build efficient, compliant flight plans without trying to

game the system.

Respect Arrival Slots

If your destination airport is slot-coordinated, **always align your flight plan with the assigned airport arrival slot**. Mismatches can lead to flight plan suspension and suspended flights aren't included in ATFM. That means no slot, no priority, and big delays. Double-check that your slot confirmation matches what you file.

ATFM (Air Traffic Flow Management) is the system that manages demand and capacity across the network. If your flight is suspended, it's excluded from this process – making it much harder to recover your slot.

Use IFPS Validation Tools

Before filing your flight plan, use validation tools like NMP Flight, the NOP Portal, or CHMI. These platforms let you check for errors, confirm compliance with the RAD, and fine-tune your routing. A rejected plan means wasted time, especially when the network is busy.

NMP Flight is now the main interface for flight tracking, planning validation, slot monitoring, and more. It replaces older tools like CHMI and adds useful features like custom alerts, critical flight marking, and real-time updates. If you haven't used it yet, it's worth getting familiar.

If you're facing a long delay, slot swaps can help – but only in specific cases. **Operators can swap CTOTs between flights** under their own AOC, provided the flights are subject to the same ATFM regulation. Each flight can take part in up to three swaps, which must be submitted via NMP Flight, the NOP Portal, or B2B. Phone requests are possible but should be a last resort. Each request is reviewed by NMOC (Network Manager Operations Centre), Eurocontrol's operational hub for managing traffic flow across Europe, so swaps aren't instant or guaranteed. But when used correctly, they can help reduce the operational impact of delays.

Submit Slot Improvement Requests Wisely

Need a better slot? **Use the e-Helpdesk, but only from EOBT minus 60 minutes**. Submitting too early won't work and flooding the system with duplicate requests won't help either. One well-timed request is all you need. Track your flight in NMP Flight, and only follow up if absolutely necessary.

Understanding Critical Flights

With the introduction of NMP Flight, operators now have access to a **useful new feature: the ability to mark a flight as Critical**. This helps Eurocontrol identify flights where delays would cause significant operational problems and gives those flights a better chance of being prioritised. This doesn't guarantee an earlier CTOT, but it does signal urgency to the Eurocontrol network team, who may coordinate with ATC or destination airports to reduce the impact of the delay.

Flight Details   Airspace Profile   Point Profile   Flight Management   e-Helpdesk   Slot Swap   Ops Log   History   IFPS History

⊟ Contact e-Helpdesk

Reason: Please choose a topic   ⌄

Critical flight: ☐   Criticality reason: Please select a reason   ⌄

                            Criticality comment:

Current   Current   New earliest take-off time: 🕐
ETOT: 23:10   CTOT: -

Text   Characters remaining: 300

Submit

You'll find the option in the e-Helpdesk tab in NMP Flight.

From 60 minutes before EOBT, you can tick the "Critical flight" box and choose a reason from a predefined list:

Critical flight: ☑   * Criticality reason: Please select a reason   ⌄

                                                    Airport closure

                            Criticality comment: Noise abatement

                                                    Crew time

Current   Current   New ea   Passenger connections
ETOT: 11:25   CTOT: -
                                              Turnaround critical

                                              Airframe utilisation

Text   Characters remaining: 300
                                              Delay compensation (EU261)

                                              Other reasons

You can also add a brief comment (up to 300 characters) to explain the situation.

What to keep in mind:

- You can only apply Critical status from **60 min before EOBT**. Earlier requests won't be accepted.

- Once marked, **you can't change or remove the flag** for that flight during the day, so be sure before using it.

- You can mark **up to 5 % of your regulated flights as Critical each day**, with a maximum of 20 flights.

- These flights are **not automatically rejected**, which improves the chance of receiving support from Eurocontrol.

Use this option carefully, and only for flights where delay would cause real disruption. When applied correctly, it's a simple but powerful tool to keep your operation running smoothly.

For Pilots: Keep It Predictable

Eurocontrol doesn't like surprises. The whole system runs more smoothly when flights do exactly what they said they would do. Sudden changes might seem harmless from the flight deck, but they can ripple through the network and cause chaos in sectors ahead. Here's how to keep things flowing:

- **Fly what you file.** Stick to your planned routing and levels unless ATC, weather, or safety require a change. That shortcut might save a minute, but it could cost someone else much more.

- **Stick to your slot.** Request start-up in line with your EOBT and CTOT. Off-schedule departures can break the flow and lead to slot issues.

- **Let your dispatch team talk to Eurocontrol.** The Network Manager Operations Centre (NMOC) is ready to help, but contact should come from dispatch. Unless you're both pilot and ops – let the team handle it.

Need Help? Know Where To Go

Your first stop should always be the **e-Helpdesk** in NMP Flight. It's the fastest and most efficient way to request CTOT improvements, mark Critical flights, or get slot-related support. The network team monitors it constantly and responds quicker when requests come through the system.

Calls should be a last resort, used only for urgent, time-critical situations. Phone support takes resources away from managing the wider network – so only use it when really needed.

Call only if:

- A flight is about to miss CTOT at the holding point.

- There's a crew duty or curfew risk.

- You're repositioning a diverted aircraft.

- You're handling a medical or emergency flight.

Contacts:

- AOLO (Aircraft Operator Liaison Officer) general line: **+32 2 745 1992**

- Airport Function (AF) – for airport-related issues or curfew risk: **+32 2 745 1903**

- AOLO Hotline – for critical/emergency issues only: **+32 496 560 300**

- Airport coordination e-mail: **nm.airports@eurocontrol.int**

For everything else, use the e-Helpdesk – it's how Eurocontrol can help you best.

Want to Learn More? Start Here

If you want to go beyond the basics and build a deeper understanding of how the European network works, here are three great places to start:

EUROCONTROL Learning Zone – Free online courses and tutorials to help you better understand European flight planning and ATFM.

ThinkNetwork Guide – Summer 2025 – Eurocontrol's seasonal briefing with key planning tips, capacity updates, and network insights.

NOP Portal Real-time source for airspace status, regulations, slots, and network operations.

European ATC delays are up 133%

OPSGROUP Team
3 June, 2025

> **In Short:** European ATC delays are on the increase, caused by staffing and capacity shortages. Monitor the **Network Operations Portal** and be flexible in your routing options if bad weather or capacity constraints are expected.

It's been a great few days on a sun-soaked Mediterranean island. Your passengers are onboard, you are about to close the door, and then you get told your Calculated Take Off Time (CTOT) is an hour from now! Sound familiar? You're not alone! ?

European air travel this summer is surging and about to hit maximum intensity. Problem is, the ATC system doesn't seem to be coping, and the misery of long flight delays keeps getting worse.

Delays are up

IATA has **recently reported** the following:

*"Data from Eurocontrol shows that in the first half of 2018, Air Traffic Management (ATM) delays more than doubled to 47,000 minutes per day, **133%** more than in the same period last year. **Most of these delays are caused by staffing and capacity shortages** as well as other causes such as weather delays **and disruptive events such as strikes**. The average delay for flights delayed by air traffic control limitations reached 20 minutes in July, with the longest delay reaching 337 minutes."*

As an operator, you may be used to seeing alerts like these daily:
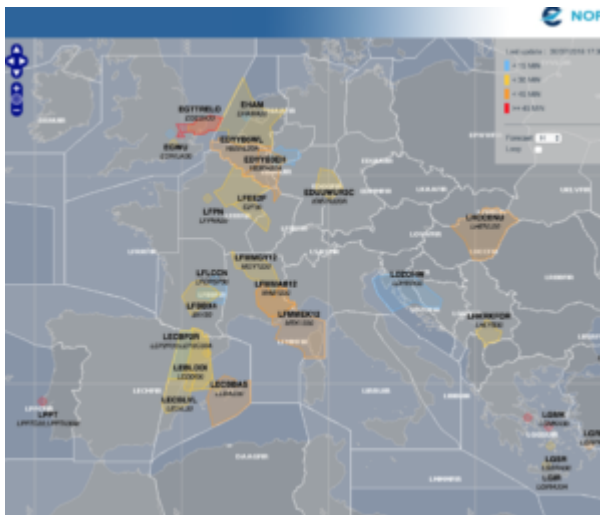
EDYY (Maastricht)

Several sectors regulated due to Airspace Management and ATC Staffing/Capacity.

Moderate to high delays.

LFMM (Marseille)

Several sectors regulated due to ATC Capacity/Staffing.

Moderate to high delays.

Ryanair @Ryanair · 4h
ATC Update:

ATC Update – Yesterday (29 July), French, German, Spanish, and Swiss ATC staff shortages delayed over 440 (18%) of our 2397 flights. We sincerely regret these unjustified delays and call on the EU Commission and these governments to take immediate action to eliminate ATC staff shortages disrupting millions of Europe's consumers this summers.

So is it a story of too many planes and not enough airspace (capacity) or just not enough controllers (staffing)?

Local airlines are not impressed. **Ryanair took to twitter** this week calling the delays "unjustified".

In a unusually **aggressive statement** IATA commented that *"key ANSPs in Europe have not made needed investments in their businesses, preferring instead to make super-normal profits."*

Some of the things we recommend to keep on top of expected delays
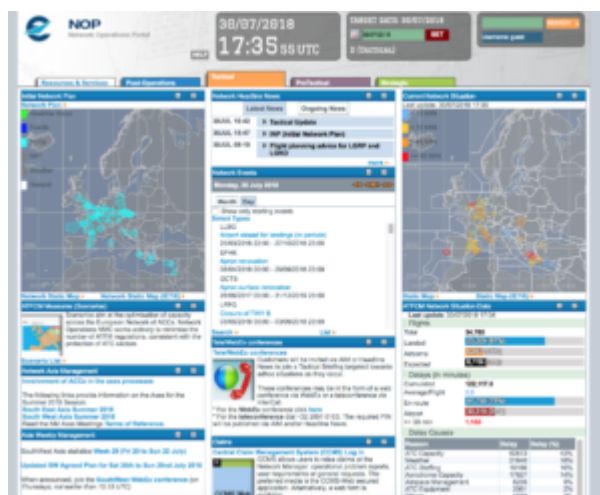
 Review the **Network Operations Portal** regularly – This will assist in making operational planning decisions based on the current delays and capacity restrictions. Also keep an eye on the **NOC tactical briefing** for the following day which may also assist.

- **Avoid** the **early morning rush** of departures if you can (**0900z**).
- Be **flexible** in your **routing options** if bad weather or capacity constraints are expected.
- **Discuss** with **the local FBO** for latest on-ground situation to better plan arrival and

departure.

- **Monitor Opsgroup** – members are always posting the latest information on recent airport and overflight experiences. Not yet a member? **Go here!**

- **Subscribe** to our **Daily Brief** to get all the latest info on ATC strikes, Airport closures, and everything else causing delays.

Got any tips or tricks on how to avoid or minimise most of these delays? Is there certain bit of airspace, airports or a time of day you've found that works best? **Let us know!**

Extra Reading:

- **European Air Traffic Control Delays Loom over Summer Air Travel** (IATA)

- **Europe's ATM Is Still Struggling With Capacity**

- **European airlines call on Brussels to prevent airspace 'meltdown'**

- **Flight delays in Europe are surging this year**