
Volcanic ash clouds Euro plans for holidays

Created: 2010-5-14 0:20:15

IT'S been a month now, and Iceland's volcano shows no sign it will stop belching ash across Europe anytime soon. A whole continent is rethinking its summer vacation plans - and struggling airlines are wondering how to cope in the cloud of uncertainty.

Although the global disruption of last month's massive eruption has faded, smaller ash plumes snarled air services intermittently over the last week all the way to Turkey - 4,000 kilometers from the Eyjafjallajokul volcano.

Air-control authorities and geologists agree that the continent must be braced indefinitely for rapid shutdowns of air services as computerized projections try to pinpoint where the ash clouds will float next at the whim of shifting winds.

"We do our best to make reliable predictions. We do not pretend to be psychics," said Einar Kjartansson, a geophysicist at the Icelandic Meteorological Office, who often has been asked to guess the volcano's next move since it began spitting lava and ash on March 20.

Volcanic ash, invisible to traditional radar and indistinguishable to the eye from normal clouds, can sandblast aircraft and force jet engines to shut down. Huge volumes of the debris forced most of northern Europe to shut its air services on April 15-20, grounding an estimated 10 million travelers worldwide.

Since then the ash plume has thinned and spread out, shifting shape by the hour, rising into North Atlantic air routes and imposing awkward detours on hundreds of trans-Atlantic flights daily.

Jose Luis Barrera, deputy president of Spain's College of Geologists, said Europe should get ready for ash-covered inconvenience at least through the summer - and perhaps longer. He noted that the volcano's last eruption ran from 1821 to 1823.

"We're going to have to learn to live with the volcano," Barrera said. "Just as in California, people learn to live with the earthquake that may be waiting for them. This is the same. Preventive measures will have to be taken for if and when the mass of ash gets worse."

Lufthansa, one of Europe's most financially secure airlines, said its bookings are on target with what they would expect this time of year. But analysts warned that most carriers are on shakier financial ground, depend on summer holiday makers for the bulk of their profits - and are particularly vulnerable to a drop-off in bookings now.

Agencies
