

Atlanta RNAV Standard Terminal Arrival (STAR) Clearance Issues

Our Member Association ALPA-I has issued the following bulletin regarding operations at KATL:

BACKGROUND

On November 15, 2016, new RNAV STARs were introduced for landing at Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL). Since then, numerous ASAP reports have been filed by pilots regarding Descend Via clearances on these STARs.

ATL STARs are more complex than most and have multiple transitions and bottom altitudes when landing from a common direction (i.e. “Landing West”).

When landing at other airports, the usual clearance phraseology that is used for this type of operation is:

“Airline 123, Descend Via WINNG1 Arrival, 27L Transition”

This clearance properly identifies which transition and bottom altitude to use.

When landing at ATL, the clearance phraseology currently being used by Atlanta Center is:

“Airline 123, Descend Via WINNG1 Arrival, Landing West”

This initial clearance from Atlanta Center does not identify a runway transition, which is needed to set the correct bottom altitude. Without a runway transition, crews are left to interpret for themselves what bottom altitude to enter. This increases the potential for pilots to select an incorrect transition and/or bottom altitude.

The charts for the ATL STARs attempt to clarify this with the inclusion of five separate procedure notes on the chart, including several “Expect Rwy XX” notes. However, an “Expect” procedure note does not constitute a lateral or vertical clearance.

On initial contact with Atlanta Approach, controllers issue the runway assignment, which does not always prompt pilots to ensure the correct runway transition bottom altitude is set.

One option would be to set the last altitude on the common portion of the route for that landing direction, and then set the bottom altitude once a runway transition has been assigned by Atlanta Approach.

As a result of this ambiguity, numerous pilot deviations have been noted by ATC. However, at this time, the FAA says they have no immediate plans for enforcement – but this could change at any time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. If you are unclear about a Descend Via clearance, ask ATC for clarification of correct transition and bottom altitude.
2. If you are unsure that adequate guidance for proper execution of your Descend Via clearance has been received or are uncomfortable with the clearance, you can decline the clearance.
3. Review all charts and procedures thoroughly.
4. Follow company guidance and Standard Operating Procedures

ALPA continues to work with air traffic controllers and the FAA to resolve this issue in Atlanta. As always, ALPA encourages pilots to continue to file ASAP reports whenever the need arises, and communicate with their airline Flight Operations management regarding any flight safety issues or concerns. Pilots from International airlines should file safety reports through their airlines and authorities.

Please direct questions and concerns to:
Engineering and Air Safety at eas@alpa.org or (800) 424-2470.