

FOR MANY VISITORS, FIRST VIEW OF U.S. IS A LINE

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Byline: By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

Body

Foreign visitors arriving at Kennedy International Airport are being forced onto huge lines for as long as four hours to reach Immigration inspectors, according to immigration officials and airline representatives.

Officials of the Immigration and Naturalization Service attribute the delays to budget-induced shortages of inspectors, tighter security measures and increased air traffic.

Although long lines are a seasonal hazard in many popular tourist destinations, airport and airline officials say the congestion for incoming foreigners at the nation's premier foreign gateway is unequaled in their experiences. American citizens, by contrast, are waved through Immigration and must only show their passports to Customs Service agents for usually cursory baggage inspections.

And at a time when a fear of terrorism has prompted a tourist drain in Europe and elsewhere, Americans face little wait and sometimes even expedited immigration procedures.

"We have never experienced worse delays anywhere in the world," said John Bastable, senior vice president of the Irish carrier Aer Lingus, one of 12 European flag carriers that have protested to Federal and local officials in recent weeks. The other airlines, acting with Aer Lingus as the European North Atlantic Carriers, are Air France, Air Portugal, Alitalia, Finnair, Iberia, KLM, Lufthansa, Olympic, Sabena, SAS and Swissair.

"It takes half as long to get into the United States as to fly from Europe," Mr. Bastable said. According to one recent complaint, an Air India flight landed at Kennedy Airport on June 24 at 3:30 P.M., but the last passenger did not get through Immigration until 7 P.M. Guyana Airways passengers on June 29 took from 1:30 P.M. to 4:55 P.M. to get through.

Normally, it might take a plane load of up to 500 people about half an hour to go through immigration, in which passengers would be questioned about the purposes and destinations of their visits. Travelers from certain trouble spots, such as the Middle East, might be questioned at greater length.

A survey by Swissair found that their arriving passengers in May waited an average of 1 hour and 35 minutes to reach the Immigration booth, and that some passengers waited as long as 3 hours and 35 minutes. Peter Schertenleib, Swissair's station manager for New York, said he had seen delayed passengers fainting in line.

Airline officials emphasized that these were not just normal delays and that major gateway cities outside New York did not have similar problems.

"We serve Boston and Chicago, but this mess is happening only at Kennedy," said Mr. Schertenleib of Swissair, which recently felt compelled to complain to the State Department.

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Jean de Reynies, Air France's station manager at Kennedy Airport, said that the police had to be called to administer oxygen to at least one passenger and that others had become ill waiting for processing. **Many** others miss their connecting flights.

"It's creating a bad image of New York and the **United States**," he said.

Elmer Hasker, the Immigration Service's assistant regional commissioner for examinations and inspections, said: "There is no denying the problem. We do have some delays of two to four hours on the extreme."

Mr. Hasker, who is based in the regional headquarters office in Burlington, Vt., attributed the congestion to a combination of factors. He said the Immigration Service had to absorb a budget cut of \$25.5 million, which forced a hiring freeze. As a result, he said, retiring inspectors were not replaced, dropping the number of inspectors assigned to Kennedy to 120 early this year from 160 last year. Since then, he said, 29 temporary inspectors were added to the Kennedy force.

He said additional financing had recently been made available to hire 11 or 12 more temporaries.

Meanwhile, Mr. Hasker said, air traffic was up an estimated 5 percent over last year. Moreover, he said, **many** of the airlines continue to bunch their flights for arrival here in the late afternoon to make connections easier. Carriers have also added morning arrivals that require stretching the inspection force to be present then as well.

Increased Security Measures

Increased security measures have placed additional demands on the Immigration staff, he said. Arriving foreigners, who in previous years might have been waved through with a few quick questions, are now subject to more intensive questioning, while inspectors check to see if their names are on a list of potential security risks.

"We realize the problems the airlines have, but the American people have made security a top priority," Mr. Hasker said. "We do our absolute best given the resources we have."

At Kennedy Airport, the Immigration Service's acting area port director, Mary Ann Gartner, said that on Monday 2,100 passengers arrived within an hour at the East Wing of the consolidated International Arrivals Building. At the same time, she said, passengers were also arriving at the West Wing section and at the six other airline terminals such as Pan American World Airways and Trans World Airlines, stretching her forces thin.

"The inspectors couldn't get out of their booths for five or six hours at a stretch," she said.

But she said she sympathized with the passengers too. "They're upset; I can't blame them," she said. "I've been referring all the complaints to the regional office."

Long **Line** of Recent Arrivals

One afternoon last week, the **line** of arrivals, four deep, stretched from the glass and wood Immigration booths, down a long airport corridor and around the corner out of sight.

"This is pretty good," said Ms. Gartner, noting that the wait would probably total less than an hour.

The travelers, who had just come off a Japan Air **Lines** flight from Japan, waited patiently, some accepting free cups of juice from a welcome wagon of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

"This is O.K.; last time I waited one hour," said Yuji Nishiyama, a salesman for the Sharp Corporation from Osaka as he and his bride, Sae, awaited their turn for the moment or two at the booth.

Mr. Hasker said staff shifts might make some additional inspectors available to ease the crush, but he acknowledged it would be difficult because the shortages were everywhere.

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Alfred Graser, the Port Authority's s manager of public services, said additional inspectors were vital.

"If we can't attain the staffing level of last summer," he said, "we're going to have a serious problem."

Graphic

Photo of passengers in line at Kennedy Airport (NYT/Cyrena Chang)

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