

Airport tries to cut waits;

Moving international passengers: Complaints about time spent clearing immigration and customs brings changes at newest terminal.

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Body

After a relaxing week in Jamaica, Sue Rowell returned to Hartsfield **International Airport**'s Concourse E ready to finally be headed home. She hadn't counted on a 75-minute **wait** to reclaim her luggage.

After quickly **clearing** U.S. **Immigration**, the first stop for **passengers** leaving Hartsfield's 13 month-old **international** concourse, Rowell had to **wait** for two bags she had checked with Air Jamaica. She and her husband, Ray, lingered almost 25 minutes at a baggage carousel in U.S. **Customs** before the luggage appeared.

"There's not much you can do," said Rowell, a travel agent in Sandy Springs. "The total **time** from the **time** we landed until we got our bags at the **terminal** was **about** an hour and 15 minutes. That's **about** an hour too long."

Soon after Concourse E opened in September 1994, a mountain of similar **complaints** quickly emerged. In response, **airport** officials, federal agencies and the airlines formed an advisory group that has been tackling problems plaguing Atlanta's primary **international** gateway for the 1996 Olympics.

Fewer **complaints** registered

Complaints like Rowell's now are on the wane, **airport** officials insist.

"I'm not yet ready to say that it's fixed," said Bob Harlin, a member of the advisory group. "But I'm pleased with the progress made toward getting it fixed. In terms of immediate objectives, we're getting there."

Some of the recent **changes**:

-The addition of four baggage carousels in U.S. **Customs**, for a total to 12.

-Signs directing **passengers** through U.S. **Customs**, the final stop in the federal inspection service. In the past, the only signs were those pointing toward emergency exits.

-Almost twice as many U.S. **Immigration** inspectors. The first in a series of federal inspections of Hartsfield's **international** travelers, an **immigration** check can take as long as 45 minutes a **passenger**. Officials hope the added personnel helps trim inspection **time** by 15 minutes during peak periods.

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Olympics an incentive

"Everyone is beefing up for the Olympics so we can give timely service," said Willie Anderson, U.S. Immigration port director at Hartsfield.

Bags from international flights now normally take less than an hour to reach the terminal, said John Green, operations director at Concourse E. During the concourse's first few months, some bags took up to 90 minutes to reach the terminal.

"That's not acceptable by anyone's standards," Green said. "We've come a long way since a year ago. I'm quite pleased by the progress."

Most airlines now move baggage directly from the customs area to baggage carts outside. Previously, air carriers moved bags to a luggage basement at Concourse E before loading them onto the carts.

Also, instead of filling baggage carts before dispatching them to the terminal, airlines now send the carts every 6 to 8 minutes, full or not, Green said.

Delta has been working the kinks out of computer software designed to track baggage from Concourse E. The airline refused to provide delivery times but said it is improving overall international service.

Varying test results

In September, Green sampled two flights chosen at random. On one, the first bag off the plane reached baggage claim in 30 minutes. The last bag arrived in 48 minutes - both within Hartsfield's goal of delivering international luggage within an hour.

But as with Rowell's situation, occasional glitches still occur. On the second flight Green sampled, the first bag took 40 minutes to reach the main terminal, but the last bag took 69 minutes.

Initially, international passengers could take their luggage on the shuttle train after clearing customs. At subsequent stops, however, passengers couldn't squeeze into cars clogged by luggage-toting international travelers. As a result, airlines began shipping bags from Concourse E.

An outpost on the airport frontier, Concourse E is 1 1/2 miles from the terminal - and the last stop on the shuttle train's run.

The long-term solution, which won't be in place until after the Olympics, would be to allow ground transportation at Concourse E. Most early complaints came from Atlanta-based passengers accustomed to the old international concourse adjacent to the main terminal.

In those days, "you could take six steps and flag down a cab," said Delta spokesman Bill Berry said. "That was the shock we felt produced the most complaints."

Graphic

Color photo and teaser box: (appeared on B/01 with reference to B/04 story) Immigration Inspector Marty Spears processes foreign travelers at Hartsfield International Airport. RICH MAHAN / Staff

Chart and illustration: Easing the crunch

Lengthy waits for baggage and time-consuming federal inspections at

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Hartsfield's Concourse E have been common complaints from international passengers. Airport officials think they've improved service. Here are some of the changes:

THIRD LEVEL (IMMIGRATION)

Take escalator or elevator down to apron level.

Exit plane to third level.

Show passport and proof of legal entry into country at immigration stations.

Change:

Interpreters on all three levels now wear badges indicating which languages they speak.

Twenty immigration officers added over the summer to assist passengers through immigration inspections.

Boarding Level

Go to gate where passengers check in and board planes.

Take escalators from underground train to boarding level.

Change:

Trying to reduce average inspection time to 30 minutes from 45 minutes.

APRON LEVEL (CUSTOMS)

Pick up checked bags.

Customs agents inspect bags.

Pay cashier any import taxes.

Pass through metal detectors.

Changes:

Recently added four baggage carousels.

More signs directing passengers through customs.

Multilingual announcements over public address system instruct passengers on customs procedure

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HARTSFIELD **INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT**

Concourse E

Ticketing and baggage claim

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/ REUBEN STERN, STEPHEN CAMPER / Staff

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