

Reentering the U.S.: A Better Way?

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Body

I have always been captivated by the phrase "citizen of the world," but international travel is a constant reminder that there is no such thing.

A true citizen of the world would be able to travel anywhere without hindrance, just as a resident of Virginia can fly off for the weekend to Miami, say, or Las Vegas, without asking any government's permission.

But with an American passport and a limited list of destination countries, you can come close to maintaining the illusion of being a citizen of the world. In Germany and other West European countries, for example, the immigration inspectors look at the cover of your passport and wave you through. At least you can maintain the illusion until you come back to the United States. Then you stand in line for passport inspection like everyone else.

Until recently. Now the **U.S.** Immigration and Naturalization Service, according to its literature, "has developed an automated system to expedite certain frequent travelers through the immigration inspections process: INSPASS (INS Passenger Accelerated Service System)."

Enrollment in INSPASS gets you a credit-card size, machine-readable ID card that, together with your right hand, qualifies you to go through a special INSPASS line at certain ports of entry to the United States (currently, John F. Kennedy International Airport and Newark International Airport).

Being in favor of expedited anything, I enrolled myself in INSPASS before my most recent trip to foreign parts.

Several things are worth knowing about INSPASS before you try to enroll. First, who's eligible? Business travelers only. (Officials check your previous entries to make sure you described your travel purpose as "business," and also to determine how frequently you travel.) To enroll you also must be a citizen of one of 25 countries, including the United States, most of Europe, Canada, Bermuda, Japan, New Zealand (but not Australia -- sorry, mate), Iceland and Brunei. You must also travel to (or **reenter**) the United States three times or more a year on business. And if you are not a citizen of the United States, Canada or Bermuda, you must hold an appropriate **U.S.** visa.

Second, INSPASS isn't a substitute for a valid passport and visa, it's just a quicker method of inspection. You must have a passport (and, if required, a visa).

Third, INSPASS doesn't work everywhere. This is a pilot program, currently operating only at JFK and Newark airports in the United States and at the INS preflight inspection facility in Toronto. You can enroll by mail -- at least in theory. The INS information says that for an application you may call 212-206-6500 or 201-645-4400. I've never gotten an answer by calling those numbers, however. In any event, you must show up in person at an enrollment

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center for final processing. Enrollment centers are located in various terminals at JFK Airport and in Terminal B at Newark Airport, and adjacent to the preflight inspection facility in Toronto.

If my experience is any guide, you should count on showing up more than once at an enrollment center for final processing. On my first try, at the British Airways/United Airlines Terminal at JFK, the computer was down. The friendly INS official on duty advised me to fill out and leave an application, and I'd be ready for full enrollment on my next visit.

Fast forward a month. Scene: the INSPASS office at the British Airways/United Airlines Terminal at JFK. Enter W. Holland, world traveler, ready to complete his INSPASS enrollment. Ahead of him in line is a weary-looking woman, being told by the friendly INS officer on duty, "Our computer is down right now, but if you'll fill out and leave an application ..."

This does not look hopeful. On being told that I have an application on file, however, the friendly officer takes my name, finds my application and offers to see what he can do. He sits down at his computer. His first attempt fails. He reboots and tries again, with the same result. I have a flight in 20 minutes and am about to give up when, on the third try, the computer recognizes my name.

Step two -- recognition. How do we know the name in the system goes with the body that shows up to enter these United States? Answer: the Hand Reader. (Plus your current passport, or other identification, to certify your hand to the Reader.)

The Hand Reader takes "biometric measurements of your hand" (to quote the INS again). It consists of a flat plate with four pegs around which you arrange your fingers and squeeze. Somewhere, someone apparently is convinced that this is enough to distinguish one person from anyone else in the world. And for all I know, it may be. Anyway, you do this three times and if the machine is satisfied that it can now recognize you, you qualify for INSPASS. (I was sorely tempted to try substituting my left hand, or the hand of the guy in line behind me, on the second or third measurement, just to see what would happen; but I did have a flight in a few minutes, and there are limits to what I am willing to do in the interest of science.)

I don't know what happens to people with no right hand, although I suspect that if the system won't accommodate them, it has a problem under the Americans With Disabilities Act.

In any event, once you are known to the Hand Reader, you are still at the mercy of one last device, the Card Maker. This makes your ID card, bearing your name, your passport number and a lot of other information best known to the INS computers. It is good for a year.

So off you go, ready to reenter the United States without the bother of standing in line.

Does it work? Well ...

Fast forward 10 days. The scene: entry to the passport inspection hall at JFK. Three 747s have just landed, and I was on the third. What's more, the 300-plus passengers on each of the 747s are almost all Americans. So we all go on the "U.S. Citizens" side of immigration inspection. I approach the passport inspection hall to find the doorway blocked by a thousand homebound American travelers, passports in hand. They have overflowed the rope maze that leads to the passport inspection stations. The line extends far up the corridor leading from the airplane.

I edge along the line, cautiously, so as not to stir resentment, and ask the woman directing traffic to the passport inspection stations at the head of the line, "Is there an INSPASS machine here?"

She points to the machine station with its friendly red, white and blue markings, standing all alone and unused, and lets me cross the rope barriers to get to it.

What fun!

I place my card in the Card Reader. A moment's pause. The Card Reader reports, "Identity not recognized."

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Wait. This is not the way it's supposed to be. Is it?

Try again.

More of the same.

An INS supervisor, seeing the trouble, wanders over. He can't make the blasted thing recognize my card either.

He sighs. "Come with me."

We go to his desk, where he checks my passport, stamps it and sends me on my way. But not until I've asked him a few questions.

Do they have much trouble with the INSPASS system? Yes. The software doesn't seem to be quite right. A replacement system is on order.

I have never believed much in palmistry, and I supposed that problems with the system would come from the Hand Reader. Not so. The Hand Reader works fine, the officer tells me. It's the Card Reader that gives everyone fits. As with me.

Still, even if the electronics didn't work, the system did. What INSPASS is intended to provide is "accelerated service," and that's what I got. I skipped a line of a thousand people and was on my way in three minutes.

So, should you enroll in INSPASS? Definitely. But don't forget to carry your passport.

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