Homebound Hassels

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Byline: James T. Yenckel, Washington Post Staff Writer

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Body

Home at last, you think, as you step off a nine-hour flight from Europe. Uh-uh, not so fast. You must first be checked through immigration and next through customs, and this process could easily keep you in the airport another hour or more. Maybe much more.

And yet, as exasperating as they seem, the delays at international arrival gates in the United States are substantially shorter this summer than during last year's peak travel period. And chances are U.S. arrivals will be even easier by next summer.

So far this season, the long, slow lines of the past reportedly have been at a minimum at Washington-Dulles, which inaugurated a new and substantially enlarged international arrivals building in March. Previously Dulles could handle only 600 passengers an hour, but it now has the capacity for 1,600.

Last year's favorite U.S. horror story was about the unlucky passengers on a fully-loaded Swissair DC-10 from Zurich who faced a five-hour delay after landing at the Los Angeles airport. This summer, delays of an hour or more remain common at several of the busiest U.S. airports, says Rick Norton of the Air Transport Association of America, which represents U.S. carriers.

Typically, the biggest bottlenecks have been at immigration rather than customs booths. The U.S. Customs Service generally only spot-checks the luggage of arriving U.S. passport-holders, waving most Americans through quickly. But the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) has been scrutinizing every arriving passenger -- citizen and foreigner alike -- more carefully. And this takes time.

Under pressure from complaining airlines, the traveling public and Congress, however, the Immigration and Naturalization Service introduced in July what it calls the Accelerated Citizen Examination (ACE) process. When waiting lines build up in front of inspection booths, local INS officials now have the option of trimming back time-consuming checks on U.S. passport-holders. At New York's JFK, the nation's busiest international airport, the new process is in effect continuously.

Typically, an agent implementing ACE provisions may decide to examine the passport of only one member of a family, explains INS spokesman Verne Jervis. Or the agent may simply match the passport photo to the person carrying it rather than also taking the time -- normal under standard procedures -- to check by computer whether the passport has been reported stolen or is a fake.

Meanwhile, INS has begun hiring additional agents to staff more gates at peak flight arrival times. Last October, the agency employed only 1,289 agents; at the end of July, it had boosted the staff to 1,605 agents, and another 195 were in the process of being hired. By the end of next month, the total number of agents is expected to reach 1,900.

The federal agency hopes eventually to be able to process every arriving planeload of passengers from abroad in no more than 45 minutes, says Jervis. If possible, all inspections, including immigration and customs, should be completed in 45 minutes, according to international air travel guidelines recommended by the International Civil Aviation Organization, a United Nations agency.

Funding for the additional 600 INS agents comes from a special $ 5 fee imposed (beginning last Dec. 1) on every airline passenger arriving from Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean. Authorized by Congress and backed by the Air Transport Association, the fee is automatically included in the ticket price. A similar $ 5 fee already was being collected on tickets from other international destinations. The expanded application of the fee is expected to generate an extra $ 75 million this year, or almost one-third of the anticipated $ 200 million to be collected from all international arrivals.

Despite these improvements, delays are expected to continue, and for at least two major reasons outside INS control. Many older U.S. airports simply do not have sufficient space in which to process the growing number of international arrivals. Though additional agents now can be hired, there may be no convenient place to put enough of them until airport terminals are enlarged. Chicago, Honolulu and San Francisco are cited as among the busiest destinations where the airports could use more inspection booths to cope with international flights but where space is very tight.

In addition, bad weather can quickly scramble normal flight schedules. On one particularly troublesome day last month, six international flights carrying 1,300 passengers happened to arrive at the TWA international terminal at New York's JFK in less than a half-hour, says Jervis. Not surprisingly, the sudden onslaught strained facilities and staff and resulted in longer-than-usual lines.

Entry delays "are something we are concerned about," says Jervis. "It's an embarrassment when people experience long waits, especially U.S. citizens. We get letters complaining to the INS."

The airlines get complaints too, and they are not exactly pleased with the Accelerated Citizen Examination process. So far, says Norton, who once worked for INS, "the results have been mixed. The Air Transport Association is still getting consistent reports of inspections of one hour or more." According to the reports, as many as 50 planeloads of passengers in a day are encountering delays of at least 50 minutes.

More to the association's liking, according to Norton, is a now-discarded INS inspection process called Citizen Bypass. When it was in effect, arriving U.S. passport-holders skipped INS inspection entirely, and in its place customs was expected to check both passports and luggage.

However, INS gradually began to abandon Citizen Bypass in 1988, says Jervis, because the agency felt standard spot-checking by customs of only some passengers and not everyone did not provide adequate security safeguards. By the beginning of this year, Citizen Bypass remained in effect only in New York and Miami, two major ports of entry, and it was eliminated at these two airports for security reasons at the outbreak of the Persian Gulf War.

Norton contends Citizen Bypass worked very well and that strict airline check-in procedures provide sufficient security surveillance of passengers. In contrast to other busy airports, New York's JFK operated effectively under Citizen Bypass last year, he says. "This year it's barely muddling along."

Responding to the criticism, Jervis says the Accelerated Citizen Examination process was introduced as "a compromise," balancing national security needs with an attempt to speed Americans through the process of re-entry. And he places some of the blame for long lines on the airlines themselves for scheduling too many flight arrivals at the same time.

The airlines and INS are squabbling on at least one other point. Norton says INS was guilty of foot-dragging in hiring new agents, that more might have been in place at the beginning of summer. Jervis contends that the abrupt plunge in international travel at the outset of the Persian Gulf War caused temporary concerns that there might not

be enough money to pay additional agent salaries, since fewer international arrivals meant less revenue from arrival fees.

Despite their differences, both Jervis and Norton agree that ACE has substantially reduced last year's sometimes horrendous delays and that increased INS staffing at international airports will further reduce ***homebound*** hassles. Meanwhile, Norton reminds, "The verdict is still out for this summer. August is always the worst month."

If you have complaints about INS delays, direct them to Commissioner Eugene McNary, U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, 425 I St. NW, Room 7106, Washington, D.C. 20536. Or contact your representative in Congress.

Airline Audio

Do you strain to hear the movie dialogue on the audio headsets the airlines distribute? Or your favorite tunes on the other audio channels?

Airline sound systems must compete with substantial engine noise, and often they do a lousy job of it, according to an article, "Airborne Audio," in the August issue of Audio magazine. But improvements are on the way.

The article, written by Rich Warren, gets technical in places, and maybe only audio enthusiasts will fully understand it. But Warren does provide tips on buying inexpensive add-on gadgets that can enhance your listening pleasure aloft while the airlines gradually introduce more effective audio electronics. A copy is $ 2.95 on newsstands.

First-Class Upgrades

Business travelers often pay the highest air fares because they can't take advantage of the best advance-purchase discounts. Midway Airlines, which has six daily departures from Washington-National to Chicago, is offering them a big break.

As of this month, passengers paying the types of coach fares used almost exclusively by business travelers now automatically receive a confirmed first-class seat when they make their reservation. To accommodate them, the airline has enlarged its first-class cabins from eight seats to 18, 20 or 22 (depending on the aircraft). Cabin configuration is two seats on each side of the aisle.

Because some companies prohibit employees from paying for first-class travel, the upgraded tickets will show the traveler booked in "Y" class, the symbol for an unrestricted coach-class fare. This eliminates the hassle of explaining to a sharp-eyed corporate accountant how you happened to fly first-class.

Most coach fares that do not require a Saturday overnight stay are eligible for a first-class upgrade. This includes discounted three- and seven-day advance-purchase fares, which Midway says are the lowest fares available to most business travelers.

"Airlines have been insensitive to the needs of the very travelers who are their lifeblood," says Midway Chairman David R. Hinson. Traditionally, business travelers have rated no better seating than leisure travelers, although often they pay two or three times as much for their tickets.

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