

Posted on Tue, May. 27, 2008

Who said an airport has to be terminally boring?

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WASHINGTON -- As air travelers begin soaring into another summer travel season, the country's airports will be waiting with a growing bounty of services that go well beyond mere takeoffs and landings.

Passengers can catch live music at airports in Austin and St. Louis; settle into rocking chairs in a tree-lined atrium at Charlotte, N.C., or curl up in a sleeping pod at Miami. Dallas/Fort Worth Airport is poised to dole out hundreds of cots and blankets if weather strands passengers overnight.

At a time when record flight delays and long waits on the tarmac have become part of Americans' flying experience, more and more airports are trying to convert themselves into huge comfort zones to soothe the nerves of harried passengers -- and, at the same time, bolster their credibility with the flying public.

A recently released survey by J.D. Power and Associates showed a 14-point drop in customer satisfaction with airports between 2007 and 2008. Overall, customer satisfaction with airports is lower than with three other travel industry components surveyed -- hotels, rental cars and airlines.

"The flying public understands we're making progress, but from the public standpoint, it's still not enough," said Jim Crites, executive vice president of operations at D/FW, which dropped to 15th from first in customer satisfaction among the country's airports. "We as an industry understand that and we're working very aggressively to try to find solutions."

D/FW has taken the lead in an industrywide campaign to more aggressively assist passengers stranded by bad weather and flight delays.

After widely publicized delays in which passengers were stranded for hours on tarmacs at other airports, Crites convened a summit of more than 30 groups representing industry, passenger advocates and government in September to begin charting a series of emergency responses.

Now, with the onset of the peak summer flying season, D/FW and other airports are stockpiling blankets, cots, pillows and sleeping mats to hand out to stranded passengers. Other measures include keeping at least one concession open around the clock to feed hungry passengers and deploying volunteer "ambassadors" to aid travelers. Red Cross units are also working with some airports to provide relief.

Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta Airport, the country's busiest, has purchased air stairs and 100-passenger buses to spare passengers from long tarmac delays and deploys a "Go-Care" team to assist passengers in emergencies. Airports in Houston, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and other cities have aggressive training programs to help employees deal with "irregular operations" caused by delays.

Kate Hanni, who became one of the country's leading passenger advocates after her American Airlines flight was stuck on the tarmac at Austin-Bergstrom for more than nine hours in late 2006, says she considers Crites a hero for confronting the problem. The California real estate agent, who heads a coalition for passenger rights, works closely with the airport executive on a government task force that seeks to improve airport responses to passenger needs.

"He's on our side," Hanni said of Crites. But, while some airports "are doing a tremendous job," said Hanni,

others "are ignoring it altogether." Among those that have a long way to go, she says, are smaller airports that have limited food services for stranded travelers.

The emergency measures put in place over the past year parallel a broader effort by airports to greatly diversify their concessions and offer a home-away-from-home environment to an increasingly mobile society.

"People are spending more time at airports," said Debby McElroy, executive vice president at Airports Council International-North America, the umbrella organization for U.S. airports. "What airport management wants to do is make that experience as pleasant as possible."

A growing roster of airports have children's play areas, game rooms, Internet connections, business centers, massage services, nail salons, DVD rentals and trendy restaurants that often reflect the local culture. Several have fitness centers and health clinics. At least four have pet hotels. Art exhibits grace numerous airports.

Passengers at Miami can drop into the Jetsetter Spa to catnap in one of the two futuristic sleep pods. The white oak rockers at Charlotte Douglas, intended to evoke a Southern front porch, quickly became one of the airport's signature touches and have sparked a nationwide trend. Rockers now line waiting areas in nearly two dozen other airports.

Airports are also rushing to meet the needs of high-tech passengers lugging laptops and cellphones. McElroy said passengers often complain about a shortage of electrical outlets at airports, often forcing travelers to sit on a walkway floor huddled around one of the few wall sockets.

Joanne Paternoster, an airport consultant with Gateway Group One in Newark, N.J., says airport managers are like orchestra conductors as they produce harmony from a diverse assortment of service, staff and unexpected emergencies.

"More and more airports are providing new, innovative levels of service as the cost of doing business today," she said. "A lot of them are stepping up to the plate."

AIRPORT ATTRACTIONS

Airports have come a long way since the first airports opened in the 1920s. Here's a sampling of what you might see on your layovers this summer:

Austin

Texas' music capital, which helped propel the careers of Willie Nelson and Stevie Ray Vaughan, displays its best-known product at Austin-Bergstrom. The airport offers 600 free shows a year in three bar/restaurants and a record store inside the secured area. Daily performances give emerging Austin performers a chance to expand their fan base and peddle CDs. "The passengers love it," Nancy Coplin, the airport music director, said.

Charlotte

Charlotte Douglas' white rocking chairs, the airport's signature amenity, were intended as part of a temporary exhibit in 1997 but were so popular that they became permanent. The chairs are made from North Carolina oak by the 83-year-old Troutman Chair Co., 45 miles north of Charlotte.

Another popular trademark, an atrium-bar piano open to anyone who wants to play, is out of service but is expected to make a comeback this summer, customer service representative Jennifer Long says. The airport has a business center and 70 volunteers to assist passengers.

D/FW

D/FW has installed several kiosks provided by commercial sponsors that offer free wired Internet and power. The Samsung business center, less than 3 years old, has television, Internet access and soft leather chairs, all available to the public. Wi-Fi is available throughout the airport.

In addition to a diverse array of concessions, the airport is fortified for emergencies, with hundreds of cots for stranded passengers and a giant vending machine that sells diapers, toiletries and baby formula. Said

passenger advocate Kate Hanni: "If you're going to get stuck, this is the most pleasant place to get stuck."

Miami

Miami is one of the most improved airports in the country according to a national customer satisfaction survey, jumping from 14th place to sixth, its highest ranking ever. An abundance of creature comforts are available in 139 concessions, including tropical shirts, Italian coffee, German ice cream, high-end electronics and a spa with two sleep pods for stressed-out passengers.

The airport is one of the few in the country with a cafe in the meeter-greeter lobby -- the Cafe Carreta, which offers Cuban and Latin American cuisine. An additional 25 concessions will open within the next six months in the South and North terminals.

Chicago

Airports are increasingly installing play areas for children. One of the most innovative is at Chicago O'Hare, where an exhibit called "Kids on the Fly" includes aviation-themed stations such as an SUV-sized helicopter, a two-story purple cargo plane, an air traffic control tower and a small check-in counter with a luggage scale.

Kansas City

Many airports have art displays and historical exhibits. More than 30 interpretative panels arrayed throughout the airport trace Kansas City's history as the "Paris of the Plains," from the jazz age in the 1920s and 1930s through the ascent of President Harry S. Truman.

St. Louis

Lambert-St. Louis has embarked on an aggressive customer relations improvement program since airport director Richard Hrabko took over nearly a year ago. Under an umbrella program called the Lambert Advantage, the airport has added a performance stage in the main terminal, rocking chairs and a cellphone lot, where those waiting to pick up passengers can park for free.

Source: *Star-Telegram* research