

Getting There

BY MATTHEW RICHARDSON

Airports and airplanes are a fact of life for business and leisure travel. Despite industry turbulence, both are working hard to make that experience a pleasure.

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Every year, London-based Skytrax surveys the world's air travelers—last year, they queried 5.5 million of them—about their preferences among the myriad airports that serve them (or claim to do so). Although most of those surveyed hailed from Europe and North America, seven of this year's top 10 airports are in Asia. Singapore's Changi consistently heads the list. Gensler's recent renovation of Changi's 10-year-old Terminal 2 (with Singapore's RSP) speaks to their constant efforts to stay on top. Changi earned well-deserved air traveler praise for an airport experience that includes exotic flowers, a bamboo garden, a swimming pool, and a free movie theater.

So Where's Our Swimming Pool?

The reason you don't see these amenities in most airports is that they aren't catering to international long-haul travelers, Kim Day explains. The former executive director of Los Angeles World Airports feels that domestic travelers prefer better retail—better food, books, and gifts. "More than grand architectural statements, they're into people-watching and well-lit, great-proportioned space," she says. JetBlue's vice president of development, Richard Smyth, agrees. "Passengers fly with us because they like the service, the fare, and the reception. We provide convenience and pleasure at competitive prices." Airports, in his view, are there to support that premise.

The availability of low fares from carriers like JetBlue has helped change people's expectations of airline service. It's also prompting a sea change in airport management, says Gensler terminal planner Keith Thompson. "For years, airlines were the primary purveyor of services to passengers both in the air and on the ground," he says. "Given the airlines' financial realities, it's now incumbent on the airports to shoulder the work of accommodating the traveling masses."



Photo: John Edward Linden

Palm Springs International Airport

Airports as Businesses

With more at stake financially, airports are competing for larger shares of the leisure and business traveler markets. As with any business, the key to loyalty lies in keeping people happy. With their post-9/11 security upgrades in place, domestic airports are trying to humanize an experience that has evolved into a people-moving machine. “Airports are run like businesses now,” says Ron Steinert, co-director of Gensler’s airport practice. “They make their reputations by delivering convenience, speed, and comfort and attracting the right airlines with the right connections.” That’s the price of entry now, he adds. What differentiate airports are the attributes that give them a real sense of place. He points to the Gensler-designed Palm Springs “Resortport” as a prime example.

Palm Springs’ lightweight cable structure “tents” shelter passengers while letting in the desert sun and views of the dramatic mountain range that serves as its backdrop. Yet the airport is all business. As its passenger capacity increased, Palm Springs required an expanded security checkpoint and a regional jet facility to maintain their signature level of service. “You have to accommodate passengers expeditiously,” says Richard Walsh, Palm Springs’ director of aviation. “I don’t want people to wait in the ticketing line, only to go wait in the security line and then in the boarding line.” He would prefer that they spend that time sampling the airport’s concessions, which is where the real money is made.

Catering to Business and Leisure

Like hotels, airports have to deal with two types of customers, leisure and business—even in Palm Springs. Leisure travelers like airports that wine, dine, and entertain them. Business travelers want a relaxed, quiet setting with wireless connectivity. “Whether an airport’s emphasis is on business or leisure, people should feel that their comfort and convenience are its highest priorities,” Walsh says.

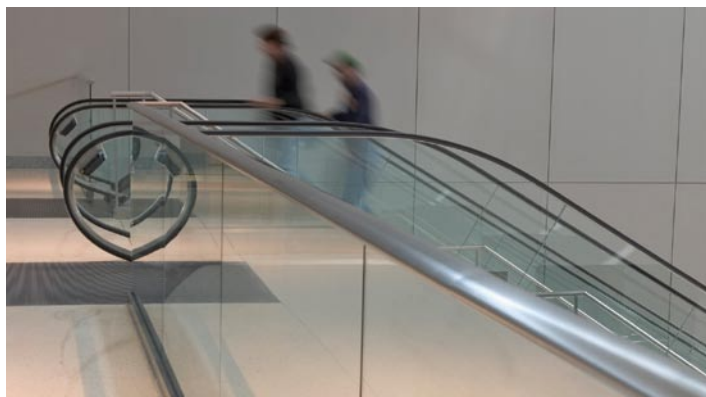


Photo: Michelle Litvin

Southwest Airlines’ Terminal at MacArthur Islip Airport, NY



Proposed renovation concept for San Francisco International Airport’s Terminal 2

The line between business and leisure travel is blurring. In 2004, 68 percent of business travelers added leisure time to their business trips, up 11 percent from 2003. Although they make up just 18 percent of travel volume, business travelers represent roughly a third (\$153 billion a year) of domestic air travel spending. That’s a big incentive for airports to make sure they feel welcome and well served. Convenient flights are an important part of this. As Walsh says, “We let our business travelers know that they can get anywhere from Palm Springs.”

Accommodating them doesn’t change the underlying makeup of the new domestic airport landscape. “Low-cost carriers have changed the equation. People use them for business and pleasure,” says Bill Hooper, the Washington, DC-based co-director of Gensler’s airport practice. “Terminals have to accommodate that reality.” Leisure travelers arrive earlier and spend more time and money in the terminal as they wait for their flights, while business travelers are in a hurry and often have work to do. JetBlue’s new Gensler-designed Terminal 5 at New York’s JFK caters to both kinds of travelers by giving them more and better food and beverage options, expanded shopping, larger hold rooms, and a speedier and more convenient check-in, security, and boarding process. “Terminal 5 is designed to make traveling on JetBlue a seamless experience,” Hooper says. “In today’s brand-conscious world, that’s a real competitive advantage.”

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