

How airports are taking the bore out of the wait

Detroit Free Press
7:32 AM, November 21, 2012
By Charisse Jones
USA TODAY

<http://www.freep.com/article/20121121/FEATURES07/121121007/How-airports-are-taking-the-bore-out-of-the-wait?odyssey=nav%7Chead>

Cooling your heels at the airport often used to mean curling up with little more than a magazine and a deep-fried snack.

No longer. Depending on where you're catching a flight, you can grab a massage, tee up for a round of golf or even bop a bit to live jazz.

Airports across the U.S. are expanding what they offer travelers to take some stress out of flying, set themselves apart from rival airports and bring in more revenue.

A 2010 survey by Airports Council International-North America, which represents commercial airport owners and operators in the U.S. and Canada, gathered information from 89 airports. It found that hubs across the country are featuring services that range from hair salons to pet hotels. You can relax in a rocking chair at Boston's Logan, sample local wines at Mineta San Jose International and walk a trail through Minneapolis-St Paul's airport.

Here's the rub: Massage

"People are spending a lot more time the airport," says Mary Grady, spokeswoman for Los Angeles World Airports, which oversees Los Angeles International Airport. She traces the change to the increased security that followed the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. "Gone are the days when somebody can drop you off curbside and you run to catch your flight. ... Now you have two or two-and-a-half hours before your flight. We have to be able to provide people something to keep them entertained."

One growing option for stressed-out travelers is getting a massage. The Airports Council International-North America study found more than a dozen airports said they offered spa services.

XpresSpa has carved out space in many of them and currently has 53 spas in 26 U.S. airports. More are in the pipeline for Miami, Denver and Salt Lake, among other cities, says Moreton Binn, XpresSpa's chairman and CEO.

"You could buy a coffee in every terminal, you could buy a beer in every terminal, so why should you not be able to get a spa massage, or pedicure or manicure in every terminal?" says Binn, who adds that massages at his facilities range from 15 minutes to an hour. More than 850,000 travelers visited the spas last year.

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Grabbing a healthy or gourmet bite also has become easier, as airports feature outposts of popular local eateries and celebrity chefs.

In September, renowned chef Masaharu Morimoto opened Skewers, his first airport restaurant, at Los Angeles International. It joined Wolfgang Puck Express and the eatery Lemonade, part of a local chain that gets creative with its namesake drink as well as salads.

And for those who prefer a hot dog, there's an outpost of the city's famous Pink's right in the international terminal.

"The whole idea was to put the L.A. back into LAX, as far as our dining options," Grady says. "You don't have to go off airport to go to a really great L.A. restaurant."

If travelers want to sample a flight of wine before their actual flight takes off, San Jose's Mineta airport has a bar that spotlights wines from the Santa Cruz Mountains, visible right across the runway. Vicki Day, director of the airport's marketing and customer services, says there has been a focused effort at the airport to give travelers a taste of the region and local communities.

From golf to pet hotels

For fliers who want to get in a bit of exercise, Los Angeles International has an 18-hole golf course next door that's also open at night. Meanwhile, Minneapolis-St. Paul International has an indoor walking path that stretches for 1.4 miles.

And if you need a convenient place to park your pet, the Minneapolis airport has a pet hotel. "It's open 24 hours a day," says airport spokesman Patrick Hogan, "so whenever somebody's flight is departing or coming back in, they can pick up or drop off their pets. They don't have to wait until the next day to get their animal."

Minneapolis also has play areas for children and salons where you can grab a haircut.

"Our vision for the airport is to have and provide the best airport experience in North America," Hogan says. "So we look for ways to do that, some of which provide additional revenue for us, others that have no revenue benefit but make this a better airport for people to come and enjoy. We believe if people enjoy the airport they're more likely to make connections through (Minneapolis-St. Paul) as opposed to Chicago or somewhere else. There's a competitive advantage to providing a good airport experience quite apart from revenues."

Going the extra mile

Boston's Logan has many of the amenities offered at other hubs, such as rocking chairs where passengers can sit and gaze at the airfield, a hair salon and children's play areas. But Logan also offers an extra service that can soothe a frazzled flier's nerves.

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"Amenities come in all shapes and sizes," says spokesman Richard Walsh, noting that Logan employees can give a traveler a free jump if their car battery died while sitting in the airport parking lot. They'll also retrieve car keys accidentally locked inside. "Who wants to end your trip by calling a local garage to come rescue you?" Walsh says.

Washington's Reagan National and Dulles airports have live musical performances year round, and like many airports across the country, they showcase art.

Reagan National even has its own historic sites. There's Terminal A, dating from 1941, and the ruins of Abingdon, a onetime plantation where George Washington's granddaughter lived, that can be viewed by visitors, says Reagan airport spokeswoman Kimberly Gibbs.

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