

The Telegraph

February 5, 2014

How to pass airport security like a VIP

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This article is based upon a report issued by IdeaWorksCompany.

Frequent fliers and regular first- and business-class customers enjoy a host of privileges that in many cases start before their flight and extend beyond arrival at their destination. Now an increasing number of airports and airlines are rolling out these benefits to travellers who may not wish to fly in first or business class but who are willing to pay a premium for some of the benefits passengers in those cabins enjoy.

First and business class passengers can enjoy a chauffeur-driven ride to the airport's Windsor Suite, a restricted-access section of the airport, where they will be met by dedicated hosts who take responsibility for the check-in process, organising luggage drop-off and shepherding their charges through a private security search area and helping with customs and passport control procedures. Customers also have access to their own private lounge before the flight, which includes complimentary refreshments and catering in addition to entertainment facilities and extra flourishes such as Jo Malone toiletries. A limousine then drives passengers to the plane steps.

Branded Heathrow by Invitation, the service is now available to those willing to pay a £1,800 fee, with up to six passengers able to enjoy the benefits with each booking.

Elsewhere, it is the airlines that are providing customers with preferential treatment, providing infrequent fliers with the types of benefits usually reserved for gold or platinum members of their frequent-flier programmes. Jay Sorensen of IdeaWorksCompany reports that American Airlines was one of the first to introduce a paid-for pre-departure VIP service. Launched in 2007, its Five Star Service initiative sees passengers enjoy priority check-in, screening and boarding and a host of other privileges, for a fee that starts at \$250 (£150).

Passengers on the main Middle Eastern airlines can pay incremental supplements to enjoy the same levels of service granted gratis to frequent-flyer programme members. A "gold service" with Emirates allows passengers departing from Dubai to use the services of a personal escort as they navigate the airport, it costs from \$56 (£34). Etihad's "gold" package provides passengers departing from Abu Dhabi with the same benefits, and lounge access, for \$68 (£42). For those who are growing tired of the ceaseless queues and security checks increasingly associated with modern-day airports

the packages should provide good value, and as well as generating extra revenue they are providing airlines with a fresh opportunity to convince passengers to pay for the complete business- or first-class experience in future.

Other airlines are seeking to capitalise either on the reputation of their brand or the appeal of the destination they serve by providing more distinctive benefits. Lufthansa's "Guide Service", offered at its Frankfurt and Munich hubs again offers the services of a personal escort but this time the levels of service are enhanced. In Munich, guides can provide services in 33 different languages; in Frankfurt guides speak a total of 51 languages. The service is priced from €75 (£60), with a €30 (£25) supplement payable for the services of a guide who speaks a language other than English or German. Passengers arriving on Hawaiian services to Hawaii can request a traditional lei greeting on arrival, receiving garlands of flowers to mark their arrival in the state.

Of the major British airlines, it is just Virgin Atlantic that allows passengers to sample the services offered to its Upper Class customers without them committing to buying an Upper Class ticket or being a frequent flier. Its "Guest List" service enables passengers to experience the ground-service products routinely offered to Upper Class passengers. After being driven by chauffeur to the airport, Guest List passengers departing from London are permitted to use Upper Class check-in facilities and to fast-track security. Luggage will be tagged as Upper Class and be prioritised for offloading after landing. Similar benefits are available from other airports and the benefit costs from £240 per person.

For airlines operating on miniscule margins the strategy is providing a much-needed revenue stream and also serving to entice occasional travellers to consider their business- or first-class services on their next flight. As awareness of this opportunity grows, expect other carriers to introduce similar packages which will give their own customers an opportunity to fly like a VIP and enhance a sense of brand loyalty in future.