

Luxury travel quarterly

Optimal spots for airport delays

By Alene Dawson

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Laying over in style

Five top airport lounges

They were paralyzed, frozen in the same hideous terminals for days on end, waiting for the crisis to lift.

The hundreds of thousands of globetrotters who were trapped late April when a cloud of volcanic ash grounded airlights around the world may wish they'd been in some of the high-end terminals that have become destinations in their own right. Such luxury commercial and private jet terminals have been springing up on every continent, offering a myriad of exclusive indulgences -- for a price.

"As airline travel (becomes) more difficult, you're going to see the emergence of these super terminals," says Jim Strong, co-owner of Strong Travel, which caters to luxury travelers and was awarded the title A-list Super Agent by Travel & Leisure magazine last year. "It's all about the VIP."

Strong says he and his colleagues have been harping on the need for luxury terminals for years, well before Iceland's volcano disrupted travel throughout Europe. "The airlines want that high-yielding customer," he notes. First-class passengers are "demanding services that are going to equal that airplane experience, so the airport and airlines are working together to promote (an) ultra-VIP experience."

This makes sense, given that some passengers are paying upward of \$15,000 a ticket. "They're saying, 'Take me out of line,'" Strong adds. "Recognize that I have paid more money for your services and I deserve a little more recognition and not to be hassled about my carry-on luggage." "

Such high-end perks, however, don't mean passengers aren't being vetted.

"The Transportation Security Administration is involved with all of this," says Kevin Mitchell, chairman of the Business Travel Coalition. "They're just involved in different ways. I don't think that anyone, including heads of state and other senior executives from around the world, (is) getting around security."

It's not skipping security that matters; it's everything else, says Stacy Small, founder of Elite Travel International. "We work with a number of entertainment industry clients," she says. "Many of our clients specifically choose to fly certain airlines due to the level of airport clubs offered."

They may also consider luxury terminals that operate outside the commercial environment. "Private jet terminals in the past five to 15 years (have) evolved from a sort of a trailer/Quonset hut to some really beautiful, state-of-the-art facilities," says Doug Gollan, editor-in-chief of the private jet lifestyle magazine Elite Traveler.

While Gollan says heavy financial investment was needed for this overhaul, this is precisely what's been missing in many commercial U.S. hubs, Strong notes.

"There is improvement in the U.S. (commercial) market, but we have a long way to go when we judge ourselves against the Asian, European or Middle Eastern markets," he says. "It's been a long time since we built a new airport in the U.S."

By contrast, some foreign terminals have become destinations in their own right. British Airways' Terminal 5 at London's Heathrow Airport opened in March 2008 and "is the airport's flagship terminal," says Brian Woodhead, retail concessions director of BAA, which operates Heathrow. "It's an iconic piece of contemporary architecture on the grandest of scales, designed to create a space that brings an unparalleled passenger-focused experience." The terminal cost \$8.6 billion, shines with marble floors and panoramic windows, and has 100-plus retail units including high-end stores such as Harrods, Gucci, Dior and Prada. There are also spas, top-tier lounges and the Gordon Ramsey restaurant Plane Food.

"The first-class check-in here looks like a living room," Strong says. "It doesn't look like a check-in area. They have a streamlined effect from the car to the check-in to the club to the airplane, and that is what the traveler is looking for."

Other noteworthy airports include the Changi Airport in Singapore. "I mean, in that airport they have a butterfly sanctuary -- think about that," Strong says. "What if your flight is delayed or you're connecting between very long-haul flights? You go into that sanctuary and it is filled with butterflies." It's also home to the JetQuay CIP Luxury Terminal ("CIP" literally means commercially important person).

Lufthansa's First Class Terminal Frankfurt provides valet, a personal assistant and chauffeur service in a Mercedes S-Class or a Porsche Cayenne directly to the passenger's aircraft. Hong Kong International (Chek Lap Kok) was named the world's best airport five times by airline and airport reviewer Skytrax and boasts elite lounges, has free WiFi and an A-list shopping mall including Burberry, Chanel and Hermes. Seoul Incheon has also won top honors from Skytrax, while the Zurich, Dubai and Kuala Lumpur airports house coveted amenities that have frequent fliers wishing they were stranded there.

For luxury private jet terminals, business centers, WiFi, and lounges are all standard. "During the Olympics in Vancouver, they had so many people -- about 20,000 people coming and going by private jet -- that they had to turn the (Million Air) hangar into a luxury lounge to accommodate them all," Gollan says. "They had it outfitted with big screen TVs, video games and they actually sold official Olympic merchandise."

Teterboro is a large private jet airport that services New York. "Its (terminals) have multiple stories, has a full fitness center with state-of-the-art equipment -- it pretty much looks as if you're going into an Equinox," Gollan says. "They've also got saunas, spa treatments, an on-site health instructor and a grand piano." Harrods Aviation provides private jet service at London Luton and London Stansted, where it sells merchandise from its namesake department store. "It caters to a lot of the clientele from the Middle East who flies in on private 747s," Gollan says. And Million Air has about 30 terminals throughout North America; amenities include big screen movie theaters.

"They borrowed some of their brand standards from Ritz Carlton hotels such as marble bathrooms," Gollan adds. "When you're going from one 8,000-square-foot house to your other 12,000-square-foot house, you'd like that same level of service and comfort en route."

Especially if, as during the volcano crisis, you're going to be stuck for days between the two.