

Embracing tech, Miami airport seeks to improve passenger experience

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Miami International Airport used to be famous for the hours-long lines passengers waited in when they arrived from other countries.

These days, the nation's second busiest [airport](#) for international traffic is hoping to be better known for the way it breezes travelers through a once-lengthy process - and connects them with better in-house amenities, including location-based alerts and, eventually, free Wi-Fi.

The changes are underway thanks to past, current and planned investments of more than \$10 million.

The most recent upgrade came just two weeks ago, when MIA became the second airport in the country after Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International to roll out the Mobile Passport [app](#). After downloading the app, U.S. citizens and qualified Canadians entering from abroad can create a profile and skip long lines after submitting customs and immigration information through their smartphone.

Within the first few day's of its launch, hundreds of passengers had used the app upon arrival.

One of them was Louis Nicastro, 51, who downloaded the free app from the App Store when an airport employee told him about it. He stepped out of line at an automated passport kiosk so Debra Shore, expedited screening manager at MIA, could walk him through the process.

"Smile!" she urged Nicastro as he took a selfie for his profile picture. It took about four minutes for him to download the app and create a profile, and another minute to input details about his trip from Trinidad and Tobago.

Nicastro, who was returning home to Delaware, made it through immigration and out of customs within 22 minutes total - a process made longer because of the attention of Miami Herald journalists.

"Anything that would quicken this process is awesome," Nicastro said.

Hans Miller, CEO of Airside Mobile, which developed the app, said his company has been impressed by the way MIA has promoted the option with giant signs and staff training.

"We've really been blown away by their enthusiasm and their desire to make this resonate with passengers," Miller said.

The mobile app joins a solution that has been in place since late 2013, when the airport installed 36 self-service automated passport kiosks to help ease waits that at one point lasted five hours.

By the end of April, 44 more kiosks - which can be used by U.S. and Canadian citizens, permanent legal residents and travelers from visa-waiver countries - will be in use. The total cost of the kiosks is \$6 million, which includes equipment, operations, maintenance and infrastructure.

"We're doing everything we possibly can to bring technology into this airport," said Miami-Dade Aviation Director Emilio T. Gonzalez. "We're pushing it out every way we can. Our goal is to have Joe traveler come through here and not make those horrendous lines that we became famous for last year."

An average of 7,000-8,000 passengers a day - a quarter of all travelers arriving at MIA from abroad - use the kiosks or Global Entry, a trusted traveler program.

In addition, last fall, the airport installed beacons throughout the facility to allow for targeted messaging and alerts. The cost to install 240 beacons was \$50,000. Airport management is still working on how they will be used.

Maurice Jenkins, Miami International Airport's division director of information systems, said MIA and partners will have the capability to give passengers step-by-step instructions from the parking garage to the gate, with information about amenities are available along the way, warnings about wait times at security and alerts about a changed gate or baggage carousel.

Airport spokesman Greg Chin said the plan is to work in beacon-related updates when the second version of the airport's mobile app, MIA Airport Official, goes live.

The airport's willingness to be an early adopter of technology like the passport app and the automated passport control kiosks shows how eager officials are to find solutions to the issues that have cropped up because of a shortage of funding for enough U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents, said Matthew Cornelius, managing director of air policy for Airports Council International - North America. The group partnered with CBP and the app developer on Mobile Passport.

"I think it's emblematic of their approach in general to try and find the latest, whatever options are out there to make the experience better, to make throughput quicker and to ensure that Miami remains a key international gateway," Cornelius said.

For the oft-requested perk of free wireless, the department plans to request bids beginning in April, and hopes to offer free Wi-Fi in 30-minute increments by the year's end.

"I have been deemed the last penguin on the iceberg," said Jenkins, referring to the many other airports already offering free Wi-Fi.

Indeed, state neighbor Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport has had free unlimited Wi-Fi since 2005. MIA offers some free access now, for travel-related sites such as airlines and auto rentals.

But offering free Wi-Fi on a broad basis will require an upgraded infrastructure capable of supporting increased usage. The project is expected to cost about \$4 million and will provide free access for 30 minutes and paid use thereafter. Customers will also need to pay to upgrade to high-speed Wi-Fi for streaming video and high-bandwidth needs.

"I'm hopeful that we'll have something by the end of the year," Gonzalez said.

Benet Wilson, co-editor of aviation news site AirwaysNews.com, said she has been impressed with Miami's efforts in technology and social media.

"I not only look at Miami, but I look at airports around the world," said Wilson, who lives in Baltimore and travels frequently to Miami, where the publication is based. "I definitely have some benchmarks on what people are doing. Miami tech-wise is right up there with some of the world-class airports."

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