

Air Travel Past v Present

Airport security checks in the world of today

From humble beginnings, air travel has evolved by leaps and bounds since two French gentlemen, Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier and the Marquis d'Arlande, conquered the skies with their ascent on the 23rd of November, 1783, floating over the Château de la Muette by means of a hot air balloon. Civil aviation first became viable by the 1930s, when Pan American launched its transpacific service, flying seven passengers aboard the Martin M-130 aircraft, dubbed the *Hawaii Clipper*, from San Francisco to Manila. The mid-20th century heralded a new milestone in commercial aviation as jet airliners, capable of carrying payload with increased velocity, were introduced to replace ailing propeller thrust powered aircrafts by virtue of innovations brought forth in propulsion. Air travel's core elements remain constant still, albeit under tighter security measures. Back when flying was something of a rarity, which only a privileged few could afford to entertain, the process involved in boarding an airplane used to be as mundane as to board a bus or a train. One could quite simply buy a ticket at any airport ticket counter and head to the gate, prior to embarkation, without going through any security checks. So lax was airport security, as to render it virtually non-existent, that no provision was made against aviation terrorism, of the kind consisting of hijackings, hostage-takings, bombings of airliners, shootings and stabbings of travellers and bystanders at airports. The honeymoon with air travel was over, and with it had vanished the era of glamour. Airport security would no longer be confined to stamping passports at border controls. Henceforth, arduous baggage checks and body searches coalesced into long queues of irate travellers lining up for their inspections, prior to the thrills of duty-free shopping. In the mid-1960s, the queues at security zones speeded up with the introduction of the X-ray baggage scanner; until the increase in demand for air travel reversed this trend. As technologies improved, more advanced scanners were put into service in the fight against terrorism, felonies, as deterrence means in drug trafficking and the smuggling of illegal substances by deploying systems that detect the chemical make-up, structure and shape of samples by rendering back coloured images in three-dimensional format. Airport security checks were reassessed in 2001 as the events of 9/11 drew ever more emphasis on body searches, coupled with increased reliance sought from technology. Body searches were made standard practice, until the introduction of the body scanner in 2007 enabled security personnel to ascertain, and identify, where on the body items may be concealed. The scanners operate using millimetre wave detection, which emit radio waves that bounce off to reveal whether anything is concealed in the clothing, or on the body. All chemical compounds are detectable, including non-metallic objects. Travellers who forego body scans for body searches may find the latter more invasive as security personnel are instructed to feel breasts, genitalia and any other body parts. The TSA may cite a failed attempt by Nigerian terrorist Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, dubbed the "Underwear Bomber", to justify their practices. Other constraints faced by travellers involve such things as limits placed on fluids, and the mandatory removal of shoes prior to walking through metal detectors, as brought forth by the failed attempt of British terrorist Richard Reid, dubbed the "Shoe Bomber", for plotting to detonate explosives packed into his shoes. Israel, a country at the cutting edge of security, has a unique modus operandi insofar that it prioritizes the characterisation of travellers and their perceived threat level through its passenger profiling system above placing other considerations on luggage. Some people may cry foul, but, the ends justify the means.