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Good (and Bad) News for Air Travelers

By **JOE SHARKEY**

As the travel season hits full speed with the holidays on the horizon, here are some of the pros and cons I've been noticing on the road lately.

GLOBAL ENTRY Good news: It's one of the most popular federal programs since Social Security, at least for Americans who frequently travel internationally and find delight in the way Global Entry membership allows them to breeze back into the country, using a quick-pass kiosk at airports and avoiding long, long lines at customs and immigration. More good news: The Customs and Border Protection agency is making agreements with other countries to allow their citizens to take part, most recently in partnerships with Britain, Germany, South Korea and Qatar.

Not-so-good news: While the agency keeps opening new enrollment centers at airports and many federal buildings where prospective members go for the required personal interview and identity verification, the program is so popular that lengthy delays have occurred in some places for scheduling interviews. And the government shutdown seems to have worsened that problem.

Solution: Though the agency headquarters are closed by the government shutdown, when I called various national enrollment centers I was told that interviews were still being scheduled and conducted, at least at most places. The locations are listed on the [Global Entry site](#).

T.S.A. PRECHECK Good news: This quick-pass airport "trusted traveler" security program, which the Transportation Security Administration has referred to as a kind of "Global Entry Lite," is being aggressively expanded. The stated goal is to have PreCheck operating at 100 airports by the end of the year. By then, the agency says, it plans to have 25 percent of the flying public eligible for PreCheck, up from 2 percent a year earlier. PreCheck passengers get special lanes and don't have to do things like take off shoes or remove laptops from bags. And the PreCheck lanes use the old-style metal-detector portals, rather than those much-disliked body-scan machines that require you to stand still with your arms raised like an arrestee suspected of armed robbery.

Not-so-good news: Enrollment centers for the new phase of PreCheck have been slow to roll out, and I question the T.S.A.'s optimism about having 25 percent of fliers eligible by January. (Because of the shutdown, the agency isn't responding to queries.) Also, while the agency says it trains screeners to provide security courteously — and a great majority do just that — I sometimes encounter surly screeners who bark orders at passengers, especially in those body-scan lanes that impose a degree of submissiveness. A recent Government Accountability Office analysis found a 26 percent increase in T.S.A. misconduct reports in the 2012 fiscal year.

Solution: Keep checking to see if your airport or airline has expanded or begun PreCheck access. If you don't now have PreCheck eligibility (Global Entry membership makes you eligible, incidentally) check the [T.S.A. site](#) to see when new enrollment centers will open. As to those rude screeners, my admittedly imperfect solution is to insist that a screener barking orders in my face must also say "Please" and "Thank you." But so far, I have resisted the impulse to ask the rude ones what kind of boot camp they grew up in.

ELECTRONIC DEVICES Good news: A Federal Aviation Administration advisory committee recently [issued long-awaited recommendations](#) that would relax many rules against using personal electronic devices when planes are below 10,000 feet. The recommendations did not include relaxing prohibitions on talking on cellphones during flights. "Voice is not included in the scope of this," Kirk Thornburg, a committee member, said in early September at the convention of the Airline Passenger Experience Association about the coming recommendations. I noticed that the people in the room, a constituency of airline executives and vendors, practically applauded upon hearing this assurance.

Not so good news: I've noticed that more users enjoying videos or music on personal devices play them so loudly that they annoy those nearby, even when the user has headphones on — a confirmation that some people's music is other people's racket.

Solution: Sorry, but the best I can do on this one, since it involves social behavior, is to quote the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr: "God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed."

AIRLINES IN GENERAL Good news: Chronic flight delays have disappeared. Airlines have become so good at baggage handling that the rates of lost bags (never very high to begin with) have dropped steadily. Airlines like American are buying new planes with more overhead bin space. In international premium-class travel, the supposedly long-gone Golden Age of Flying, I

would submit, is now, with lie-flat beds and fancy food and drink. And corporate travel managers are generally allowing business travelers across the board to upgrade to better seats.

Not-so-good news: Airline executives now boast about their new “up-sell” revenue, while passengers are left with slim choices for coach seat assignments at the posted base fares. More and more, large areas of the coach cabins with the better (or less awful) seats are essentially roped off for those who choose to buy a better seat for an extra fee.

Solution: As the Mafia used to say, pay up if you wish to avoid further discomfort.

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