

We can't rely on technology to weed out suspects

Joanne O'Connor, Escape editor, asks if passenger profiling is the way forward in the new and unsettling world we inhabit post-9/11

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The thing that has struck me most about the media coverage of 'scenes of airport chaos' in the last few days has been just how strangely calm it all looked. Yes, there were overcrowded terminals and long queues of tired and disappointed people. But chaos? Not really.

Reporters at the airports tried valiantly to whip up some ill-feeling. 'Surely you must feel angry about this terrible disruption to your holiday?' asked GMTV's John Stapleton of one cheerful looking mother of three waiting to fly to Boston, while her son waved at the camera. But the prevailing response has largely been one of good-humoured stoicism. There seems to be an understanding that this is the new and unsettling world we inhabit post-9/11, and people have risen to the challenge.

But how have the government, the airlines and airport authorities fared in comparison? Within 24 hours of the foiled terror plot being announced, almost all UK airports were running a full timetable of flights, albeit with some delays.

Clear messages had been sent out about what could and could not be taken onto aircraft and by Friday, emergency goodie bags of toys, sweets and games were being handed out to families at terminals. They are to be commended on this but it's how the authorities deal with the situation in the coming weeks which will determine how much of an impact this latest threat has on air travel.

Whenever there is a terrorist attack, much is written about the resilience of the travelling public. After 9/11 airline passenger numbers dipped drastically with dire predictions for the future of air travel but by the summer of July 2004 more of us were taking to the skies than ever before. But this goodwill and resilience should not be taken for granted. August is one of the busiest months of the year for holidays. Thousands of people who might have been looking for a last-minute bargain flight this week will now be choosing to holiday in the UK or taking a train or ferry to their destination instead. Add to this the growing unease about flying as people become more aware of its environmental impact and the prospect of more expensive flights as fuel prices rise, and it seems as if the airline industry could be in for a bumpy ride.

Which is why the sooner the current security measures are relaxed the better. Nobody wants their safety to be compromised but forcing nursing mothers to drink baby milk to prove it doesn't contain liquid explosives is a knee-jerk reaction, akin to that of stopping grannies taking their knitting needles on flights after 11 September 2001: supposedly reassuring but ultimately pointless.

'It's an understandable reaction in the short term but it must not be allowed to carry on. We have to allow people to travel normally or terrorism wins,' said Philip Baum, managing director of aviation security company Green Light. Like an increasing number of security experts, he believes the best way of achieving this is by behavioural analysis and passenger profiling.

This would create a two-tier security procedure whereby passengers deemed to be low-risk (ie a lactating mother of two from Somerset who is unlikely to have recently passed through an al-Qaeda training camp) would be fast-tracked through security, while those travellers matching a high-risk profile will be subjected to more rigorous screening. This approach will inevitably cause offence to some, largely because ethnicity will be one of the components of the profiling, but there is compelling evidence that it is one of the most effective ways of stopping people carrying explosives getting onto aeroplanes.

Allowing the majority of people to proceed quickly through the airport would also cut the huge queues in the terminals which in themselves are soft targets for suicide bombers.

Another possible outcome of the latest threat is that the implementation of new technology such as 'sniffer portals' and body scanners which are currently being trialled is speeded up. Unlike current walk-through detectors, which can only pick up on metallic objects, these can detect explosives and non-metallic objects being carried underneath clothing. It's not a cheap option: the average explosive detector portal is 20 times more expensive than a traditional metal detector, and this cost would eventually be passed back to the passenger in the form of more expensive air fares.

According to Baum, 'the main hurdle to better security is political correctness. People don't think profiling is fair but security doesn't have to be fair'. Harsh words but it's a harsh new reality we are confronting. And if higher air fares and causing offence to some people is the price for better security then it's one that we should be prepared to pay.

How to travel without hand luggage

- Restrictions on hand luggage were still in place as Escape went to press.
- Some items can be taken past security in a clear plastic bag: wallets, travel documents, medicines; spectacles without cases; contact lens holders without solution; female sanitary items, tissues, keys - without electronic key fobs - baby food and milk, which must be tasted by the passenger accompanying the child, and nappies, wipes, creams and nappy disposal bags.
- All other items must go in checked-in luggage, including mobile phones. Before you leave, write important numbers on paper so you can use payphones.
- Once past security you can buy goods which can be taken onto the plane. The one exception is flights to America: the US authorities have banned passengers from taking on board liquids and liquefied products including drinks, duty-free alcohol and toiletries.
- Don't assume items in your hold luggage will be safe. Theft by baggage handlers is rife, so leave valuables at home if possible and check what your insurance policy covers if something does go missing. Neil Thompson of personal security company red24 recommends using cable ties available from hardware stores rather than locks on suitcases as they are stronger and you can see if they have been tampered with.
- Ryanair is not charging passengers to check hand luggage into the hold at present, but is still charging for hold luggage.
- Checked-in hand luggage will not be included in your hold luggage weight allowance.