

As international travel grows, so does US use of technology. A look at how it's used at airports

April 3 2024, by Rebecca Santana



Piet De Staercke, from back right to left, with his wife Jill Bornauw, their eldest son Stan De Staercke, watch their youngest Tuur de Staercke, get screened by a Custom Border Protection officer, right, in the port of entry at Washington Dulles International Airport in Chantilly, Va. Monday, April 1, 2024. The Belgian family of four, used the Mobile Passport Control app, the newest technology in international travel, to ease their way to their port of entry. Within

minutes they had bypassed a long line of people waiting at the airport's passport control and were waiting for their luggage. Credit: AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta

The Belgian family of four was on their fourth trip to the United States. They had been dreading the long line at passport control when they entered the country but had heard about a new app they could use to ease their way and decided to give it a shot. Within minutes, they had bypassed the long line at Washington Dulles International Airport and were waiting for their luggage.

"It was always a long row," said Piet De Staercke of the line to go through passport screening. He, his wife and two sons were visiting Washington and Chicago. "We were a bit scared. But now with the app, it's amazing."

As travel continues to boom following coronavirus pandemic-related slumps, U.S. Customs and Border Protection is expanding the use of technology like the Mobile Passport Control app the De Staercke family used in an effort to process the ever-growing number of passengers traveling internationally. And with events like [a rare solar eclipse](#), the Olympics in Paris, and summer holidays still driving international travel, those numbers don't look set to drop anytime soon.

Customs and Border Protection officials gave The Associated Press a behind-the-scenes look at some of the technologies they've been using and what to expect in the months and years ahead.

THE NUMBERS

During fiscal year 2023, the agency processed over 394 million travelers

at the ports of entry. That's a 24% increase over the previous year. When looking at the country's top 20 airports by passenger volume, officers processed 31% more travelers while average wait times increased 11%. And at some of the busiest airports, the wait times have had negligible increases or even decreased. At JFK Airport in New York, for example, wait times went down—by 0.4 of a second on average—while CBP officers processed 33% more travelers.

Increasingly, people are traveling internationally with their families rather than going abroad alone for business.



International travelers not using the Mobile Passport Control app, stop and use the portal to get their initial processing and instructions on their next procedure, in the port of entry at Washington Dulles International Airport in Chantilly, Va. Monday, April 1, 2024. A Mobile Passport Control app user can bypass this

procedure and go straight to a Custom Border Protection officer for processing easing their way to the port of entry. Credit: AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta

MORE APPS

Officials are moving more toward app-based technologies to [speed passengers' movement](#) through the airport. The Mobile Passport Control app used by the Belgian family is one example. It's available to U.S. citizens, but also to lawful permanent residents, certain Canadians and travelers from countries who are part of the Visa Waiver Program who've already been to the U.S. at least once.

Passengers upload their photos and information to the app. When they enter the screening area, they get routed to a separate line. The officer then just needs to take a photo of one member of the family and it pulls up the entire group's photos and their information.

CBP launched the app in 2021 but is now trying to get more people to use it, including by working with airlines to allow the app to be downloaded while the plane is in flight and putting up signs at airports to let travelers know about it. Last year, a record 4.1 million people came into the country using the app.

"Any second that we can save through the process, it saves time because it adds up eventually," said Marc Calixte, the top CBP official at Dulles.

Last September, the agency also created an app specifically for passengers who use Global Entry. That's one of the "Trusted Traveler" programs CBP runs that allows certain low-risk passengers who make an appointment for an interview and submit to a background check to travel through customs and passport control more quickly when they arrive in

the U.S.



A Custom Border Protection officer, right, puts his thumb up as Tuur de Staercke, left, gets screened in the port of entry as his family watches at Washington Dulles International Airport in Chantilly, Va. Monday, April 1, 2024. The Belgian family of four, used the Mobile Passport Control app, the newest technology in international travel, to ease their way to their port of entry. Within minutes they had bypassed a long line of people waiting at the airport's passport control and were waiting for their luggage. Credit: AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta

IMPROVEMENTS TO GLOBAL ENTRY

Last year saw a record 3.2 million people apply to the Global Entry program, and this year the agency is on track to field about 4 million applications, said Brendan Blackmer, CBP branch chief for the Trusted Traveler Programs. But passengers have complained about how long it can take to get applications processed and their struggles to get appointments. On its website, CBP says it averages four to six months to process applications. In February, [17 members of Congress](#) wrote to CBP demanding information, saying they were fielding complaints from constituents over the wait times.

Blackmer said the agency has pushed to improve the process, including by allowing nearly 100% of people renewing their status to do so without having to come into an enrollment center. That frees up appointments for first-time applicants. And it's pushing for more people to be able to complete the process while they're in the airport, either leaving or returning from a trip.

There are also more appointments available, Blackmer said, although some cities like San Francisco are still seeing so much demand that appointments can take more than 90 days to get.

"We've done a lot of work the past year and a half, and the agency's in a better position now and able to meet the demand for the program. And we're going to continue to work," Blackmer said.



International travelers go down the escalator to get processed at the port of entry at Washington Dulles International Airport in Chantilly, Va. Monday, April 1, 2024. Credit: AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta

FEE INCREASES

Come Oct. 1, people using some of the Trusted Traveler Programs will see increases to the fees they pay. The cost of NEXUS, a U.S.-Canadian program designed to ease travel between the two countries for pre-approved travelers, will go from \$50 to \$120. Global Entry will go from \$100 to \$120. SENTRI, for pre-approved travelers on the southern border with Mexico, will go down, from \$122.50 to \$120.

But the fees will now cover all kids under 18 regardless of which

program you're in.

What's unchanged is that approval for the programs will still be good for five years.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Calixte said possibly by the end of summer the airport will be opening so-called E-Gates where passengers using Global Entry can use the app, bypass an officer at a booth, and instead go to a gate where their photo is taken and matched to their passport, and, assuming no red flags arise, the gates open and they pass out of the customs and passport control area and are on their way.

Further on the horizon, Blackmer said the agency is exploring a concept called smart queuing, where the app assigns passengers to certain lines depending on information they have entered into the app, such as whether they have goods to declare.

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