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By Betty Stark

Airports Now Appealing to Senses to Ease Tension

The Department of Homeland Security announced recently that it is testing a new concept at **Baltimore/Washington Thurgood Marshall International Airport**, one that will "calm the airport checkpoint environment" and, while they are at it, enhance security.

Dubbing it "Checkpoint Evolution," DHS officials explain in their new website display (<http://www.tsa.gov/evolution/index.shtm>) that, in effect, the goal of the experiment is to soothe stressed travelers who shuffle like drugged lemmings, shoeless, stripped of metal objects, liquids and valuables through a clatter of gray plastic bins toward grim-faced TSA officers who decide whether full-body imaging will be the next indignity.

The other goal, of course, is to segregate the genuine terrorist who might be lurking in line, tense, agitated and unfazed by the new soft lighting, informative color murals and ambient music.

Music? At an airport? I scroll through my brain, seeking shreds of evidence that I have been consciously aware of music at an airport. The drone of the 24/7 **CNN Airport Network**, the grating cacophony of gate announcements, the flat-voiced admonitions to report suspicious bags or move vehicles from the loading zone.....yes. But has there been *music*?

Well, yes. Who can ignore **Chicago O'Hare's** underground light show between Concourses B and C? At 744 feet long it's the world's largest kinetic neon sculpture with undulating color scapes and a shimmering rendition of **United Airline's** rhapsody-in-blue theme song "The Sky's the Limit."

And there's more at the airport many of us love to hate. To showcase Chicago's diverse music scene, the Department of Aviation there

recently launched "Terminal Tunes," a program that exclusively features recorded works of about 75 artists who are either from the Chicago area or record for Chicago-based record labels.

The extensive catalogue of mostly instrumentals ranges from blues to jazz, country and classical. Next time you are biding your time at **O'Hare** or **Midway**, tilt an ear toward the ceiling and tune in the new music program.

Though recorded music is the norm at most airports, it's also possible to enjoy live performances in airport terminals. I once lingered at a live country-rock music performance at **Austin-Bergstrom International** as I waited out a lengthy flight delay. I've enjoyed live airport performances at **Nashville**, where music is king, at **Denver** as a blizzard howled outside, and at **Memphis** seated at Corky's Ribs and BBQ, surrounded by the rich fragrance of barbecue and sweet sounds of blues.

As airport music goes, there is a lot more worldwide than most of us realize, and in part we can thank Brian Eno, the "father" of modern ambient music. He was first noticed as the keyboardist/synthesizer of British art-rockers Roxy Music, and then he penned the acclaimed album (which you probably have never heard of) ***Ambient 1/Music for Airports*** back in the seventies.

The revolutionary musician's rapt fans describe the album as simple, soothing, atmospheric. In a more practical vein, Eno describes this work as "able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particularignorable as well as interesting." In other words, perfect for airports. What surprised me were the accolades of present day fans who clearly adore Enos' creation.

"*Music for Airports* is one of the cornerstones of my musical identity," wrote one recent reviewer. "I've heard it a thousand times and carry it with me on my mp3 player for those times when my flight is delayed. If it's delayed long enough, I get to listen to the whole thing!"

"A barely-there wash of sound----calming, serene and peaceful," mused another.

"An amazing piece of music," effused another. "The sensation is a bit like being reincarnated or waking up after a sleep of several long years."

In other words, good stuff for airports.

This set me thinking about other ways that airports work to take the edge off of mind-numbing delays and the pervasive indignities of air travel.

Let's take airport spas, for example.

These calming oases in a sea of chaos are popping up like proverbial mushrooms after a spring rain. **XpresSpa** (www.xpresspa.com) is one of the better known operations, with several locations offered in the US and a recently-opened facility in Amsterdam. Look for new XpresSpa outlets to open during October and November at **St. Louis, Minneapolis, Atlanta and Washington-Reagan** international airports.

The concept appears to be a winner. "Good Morning America," "The Today Show" and "NBC News" as well as several national print media outlets all have touted the benefits of the full-service XpreSpa facilities that offer massages, facials, manicures and pedicures, for women and men.

If you have enough time between flights and without leaving the confines of the airport, you can be massaged, waxed, exfoliated, deep-cleansed, rejuvenated, slathered with seaweed serum, revitalized, scrubbed, buffed and purified. Your skin cells will be renewed, eye puffiness diminished, sinus pressure banished and neck and shoulders soothed and relaxed.

There are several other spa and workout options, at and close by airports. For details, check out "**Airport Gyms—Exercise on the Fly**" (www.airportgyms.com) and "**Travel to Wellness**," (www.traveltowellness.com/airportspas).

And don't overlook spa and health club facilities at major airport hotels like the Hilton Health Club and Spa at Chicago O'Hare and Boston Logan, and the Vancouver, BC Fairmont Airport Hotel. Many others like these offer day spa or health club access, though it's best to call ahead to make sure they accept visitors who are not guests of the hotel.

Art, too, plays a significant role in softening and enhancing the otherwise harsh and forbidding terminals, concourses and labyrinths of major airports. At **Phoenix Sky Harbor International**, the Art Collection includes more than 500 works accumulated since the

program launched in 1962. Large murals and freestanding sculptures have come to define the facility, augmented by paintings, photographs, ceramics and fine arts prints that are rotated throughout the airport system.

At **New York JFK International's Terminal 4 Immigration Hall**, there's no missing Deborah Masters' stunning painted relief titled "Walking New York." Depicting scenes of the five boroughs of New York, the work consists of 28 panels measuring 8 feet by 350 feet.

There is no denying that air travel is stressful and most frequent travelers have come to revile airports as great holding pens. But to give credit where credit is due, many airports are trying to lessen the discomfort by embellishing the surroundings where we are held captive. The rest is up to us.