Terror and Tourism: Again!

First the good news. With international cooperation, British authorities foiled an alleged plot to blow up multiple aircraft loaded with summer travelers from London to the United States. A major travel disaster was averted and hundreds, if not thousands, of lives may have been saved. While some people may have cancelled air travel in the past few days, I believe the vast majority of travelers have kept flying, giving a ringing endorsement to the overall global system of air travel.

The bad news, of course, is that the episode caused a great deal of inconvenience and economic loss to travelers, almost all forms of transportation, and the millions of people who work in the Travel & Tourism industry.

My wife Linda, daughter Anne Marie, and I were scheduled to fly out of Denver on August 10, the morning the terror plot and new rules on hand luggage were announced. Fortunately, we had turned on the morning news just before we drove to the airport and had time to quickly rearrange our luggage so we only had a spare jacket and some reading material to carry on.

The concourse of Denver International Airport was filled to overflowing with people waiting patiently in lines that snaked for hundreds of yards from the security processing areas. Workers at the ticketing and check-in counters and the security screening stations were obviously under a lot of stress. Airline representatives were going up and down the lines of waiting passengers, advising travelers to go back to the ticketing desks and check any luggage they had hoped to hand-carry if it contained toothpaste, lotions, or other liquids. Everyone seemed to accept this and remained courteous and calm.

Our flight to Seattle was delayed, and when we finally boarded, the flight attendants looked a little worse for the wear. They told us they had been called at their hotel early in the morning and, with little additional information, were told they would soon be picked up—early—for transport to the airport because of a security alert. They stuffed their possessions into their hand-carry luggage and headed to the terminal, hoping they could finish the morning make-up job either at the airport or aboard the aircraft. Unfortunately, as they were led through security, their lipstick, lotions, and potions were confiscated, leaving some flight attendants looking as if they had just gotten out of bed.

Passengers also had many normally innocuous items confiscated. We watched a young child come on board with tears in his eyes. “Juice? Juice?” he pleaded to the flight attendant. When his mother explained that security had dumped the contents of his baby cup, the flight attendants quickly provided a refill.

Returning to good news, the situation appears to have returned to near normal at all U.S. airports over the past week. Passengers are aware of the new restrictions on liquids and gels in hand-carried luggage. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has lightened up on allowing passengers to take small amounts of medications and baby formula aboard. As I write this article on Thursday morning, the waiting time for security at Denver International Airport is reportedly only five minutes.

Restrictions on hand-carried luggage have caused some shifts in airport operations. The skycaps are happy because more checked luggage means more tips. The airlines and their baggage handlers are struggling, as their already strained baggage systems are suddenly handling from 10 to 40 percent more checked baggage, according to the Wall Street Journal. Mishandled baggage complaints are up. Airport operators, who often rely heavily on the income from retail concessions in terminals, are afraid that sales will drop significantly.

Hotels and resorts obviously worry that the threat of terrorism will depress tourism. So far, that does not appear to be the case. Our Waikiki properties continue to run occupancies above 90 percent this week. The abundant evidence that the overall economy is beginning to slow down can explain any recent decrease in travel numbers.

In the meantime, let’s send special thanks to all the workers in the air transportation system. They have all worked tirelessly during the past week to keep the system going.

And finally, during the coming weeks, please make an extra effort to help guests at our properties feel really welcome. Like everyone else in Travel & Tourism, they, too, have probably had a very long day.