

Fingerprints replace boarding passes and ID

The breakthrough outlined in the headline is already happening in the US, where the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has started using biometric fingerprint technology that lets fingerprints serve as both proof of identification and boarding pass.

The new technology will, in theory, cut down queuing and make check-in faster. If it works well, it could eventually spell the end of passports, which are, after all, just a form of identification.

The TSA this week started a four-week live trial of its PreCheck fingerprint ID program at two big US airports: Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport and Denver International Airport.

The TSA confirmed that its “proof of concept demonstration” aimed to evaluate the “operational and security impact of using biometrics to verify passengers’ identities using their fingerprints”.

Biometric authentication lets a traveller’s fingerprints serve as both a boarding pass and identity document. The technology matches passenger fingerprints provided at the checkpoint to those that have previously been provided to TSA by travellers. That’s the catch – the travellers have to place their fingerprints on file electronically, which they can do by enrolling in the TSA PreCheck program.

That means firstly that the program is voluntary, and secondly that it’s currently just



available in the US and not to international travellers. It is seen, however, as the way of the future, coming soon to an airport near you.

“TSA looks at technologies and intelligence capabilities that allow us to analyse and secure the travel environment, passengers and their property,” the TSA’s acting assistant administrator, Steve Karoly, commented.

“Through these and other technology demonstrations, we are looking to reinvent and enhance security effectiveness to

meet the evolving threat and ensure that passengers get to their destinations safely.”

“In the long term, this technology has the potential to automate the travel document checking process by eliminating the need for a boarding pass and identity document, and granting or denying traveller access into the security checkpoint through an electronic gate,” the TSA said.

“The long term” often turns out to be sooner than many people think.

Which are the world's best and worst airports?

A certain airport in New Zealand is better than any airport in Australia, and British airports are among the world's worst, according to a new ranking which examines punctuality, quality and service at 76 airports worldwide.

The AirHelp survey takes passenger sentiment into account and its quality-of-service rating, from Skytraxresearch.com, factors in hundreds of details to measure service quality. It uses criteria ranging from terminal comfort and passenger facilities to check-in and security.

Cutting to the chase, the winner of world's best airport is... you guessed it (perhaps): Singapore's Changi, everyone's favourite airport, which consistently comes first in surveys, largely by giving travellers what they want. That's not as simple as it seems, apparently, considering that competing airports have great difficulty beating Changi.

Munich Airport, another star performer, offers travellers its own Bavarian brewery – how can you beat that? Munich Airport came second worldwide in the AirHelp survey. Third was Hong Kong Airport.

Auckland Airport was the top airport in the Australasian region. It came 9th worldwide and was the only airport on either side of the Tasman to make the top 10.

Two Australian airports were placed in the top 20: Perth Airport came 14th and Sydney Airport took 17th place. Melbourne Airport came 37th, roughly halfway through the list.

The top 10 places, with aggregate scores out of 10, are:

- Singapore Changi 9.07
- Munich, Germany 8.66
- Hong Kong 8.42
- Copenhagen Kastrup, Denmark 8.04
- Helsinki-Vantaa, Finland 8.03
- Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky, USA 7.94
- Barcelona El Prat, Spain 7.90
- Madrid Adolfo Suarez-Barajas, Spain 7.81
- Auckland, New Zealand 7.80
- Frankfurt, Germany 7.76

British media has made much of the fact that four British airports were included in the



worst 10 in the world. The four did not include Heathrow Airport, well known to Australian travellers, which ranked 20th.

Gatwick, Manchester and Stansted were listed in the bottom five and Edinburgh came 71st out of the 76 airports in the survey.

Worst airport in the world (or worst of the 76 surveyed) was, wait for it... Kuwait Airport. London Gatwick was just one behind, breathing down Kuwait's neck for the title of world's worst.

The worst 10 airports of the 76 surveyed (and their scores in the AirHelp index) listed worst-to-best, were:

- Kuwait 5.02
- London Gatwick 5.38
- Manchester 5.43
- Newark Liberty, New Jersey, USA 5.92
- Stansted 6.07
- Edinburgh 6.10
- Mumbai, India 6.21
- Dubai, UAE 6.24
- Bangkok Suvarnabhumi, Thailand 6.30
- Delhi, India 6.31

Other points of interest:

The only American airport in the top 10 was Cincinnati Northern Kentucky International, which came 6th. Next-highest-scoring US airport was San Francisco Airport, at 19th.

Malaysia's Kuala Lumpur International Airport came 18th.

Dracula castle will reopen after bears are captured



Romania's Poenari Castle, a tourist attraction because of its links to Dracula, will reopen as soon as a mother bear and her three cubs are rounded up and relocated.

The protective mother bear came close to several tourists last month, leading authorities to declare the castle off limits.

Romania has more bears roaming free than the whole of the rest of Europe. The country's 6000 brown bears comprise 60% of Europe's total.

Poenari Castle, a 15th-century fortress overlooking the Arges River in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, is associated with the weird prince Vlad the Impaler, believed to have inspired Bram Stoker's 1897 eerie gothic novel Dracula.

Dracula tourism is big business in Romania and everyone wants a stake in it. Romanian tourist operators are currently releasing new Dracula tours.

"Dear Ladies and Gentlemen," writes George Marginean of Karpaten Tourism of Romania, "As we are on of the biggest and most important tour operators in Romania, we have developed a program with two fixed dates and guaranteed departure, namely: Home at Dracula.

"As we would like to keep a low selling price, we offer a commission of 20% from our package price. That would be between 69 EUR and 105 EUR per person. We thank you in advance for your short feedback, and for any further information, we are at your disposal!"

The enterprise is offering an eight-day tour from EUR 345.

Bears are turning up more often at the Dracula sites and police blame tourists, who they say leave picnic food around. Some even try to attract the bears as a backdrop for selfies.

While Vlad had repairs conducted at Poenari,

he is more closely associated with Bran Castle, Romania's biggest Dracula-linked tourist attraction. Whatever Vlad may have done there, he never took a selfie.



10 reasons you can't travel without an agent

There's nothing like a handy little list to remind people just how integral Travel Agents they are to the travelling process, and why we shouldn't consider leaving home without one.

US trade publication, Travel Market Report, has crafted a list of 10 reasons why, from a customer's perspective, you still need travel agents.

It comes just after our exclusive chat with Spencer Travel's Penny Spencer, who gave clear reasons why agents are still in business, and Travel Counsellors' MD Fred van Eijk revealed the one thing that will stop agents being replaced by technology.

Check out their top 10 reasons:

1. Accountability

Per TMR, an agents' job is getting scrutinised every time they book a job, meaning if anything goes awry, they'll be held accountable.

Travel agents have a boss to answer to—or they are the boss—and they are real-life people (not machines) that clients can speak with to work things out.

2. Knowledge

According to TMR, travel agents know all the ins and outs of the industry, especially when they've been doing the job for years.

Taking your first cruise ever? Wondering if terrorism is affecting travel anywhere in the world? Skip the OTA and come armed with all your questions to badger your beloved agent.

3. Value for money

When booking an expensive trip, travellers don't want any shortcuts, and want to make sure they see everything and experience the best a city has to offer.

Per TMR, having a travel agent guarantees you're not blindly feeling your way through a destination, and will ensure you get all the hot tips on local treasures to discover on your journey.

4. Setting an Itinerary

Perhaps those who enjoy "winging it" won't be the best targets for agents, says TMR, but



if you're after clear guidelines, personalised touches, and secure records of everything you've paid for, then you'll want an agent.

5. Budgeting

According to TMR, working with a travel agent means they'll be able to help map out exactly how much a trip will cost – no surprises in store!

Does that excursion on Monday include lunch, for example, or do you have to buy your own? Is it worth paying extra for the all-inclusive on a cruise ship? Book with an agent and all these things are considered.

6. Insurance

Things happen, writes TMR, but travel agents make sure you're not alone when it happens. They also have a spate of insurance providers to recommend for you, depending on your needs.

They also insure that travellers have the correct travel documents, so they don't end up missing their plane or cruise.

7. Resources

At the touch of travel agents' fingertips they have resources a traveller simply does not, writes TMR, and boy do we know it. American Express Travel recently shared just what kinds of things agents know that the ordinary traveller doesn't.

8. Exclusivity

Let's face it, we all like to be treated special, and with an agent, everything gets the personal touch, from your preferences when you arrive at a hotel, to the tour timings that suit your sleep patterns.

Per TMR, a travel agent knows the new destinations and the new places in them — and often they can get their client in through their partners and connections.

9. Time savings

Spending hours and weeks researching the perfect trip can take up a ton of time during a busy work week. And as Penny Spencer says, agents sell time.

Per TMR, Travel agents will spend a little time getting to know their clients and what they are looking for, and then put together an entire vacation customized for them.

10. Leverage

Can't book a room at a place you really want? Had a last-minute addition to a trip but all the rooms are booked? No problem.

According to TMR, travel agents spend years developing long-term relationships, and use this leverage to get what they want for their clients, with a far greater success rate than a general consumer.

