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Tourism

McCarran applauded for technology at conference

By [Richard Velotta / Staff Writer](#)

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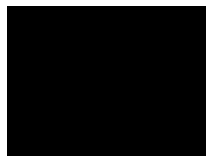
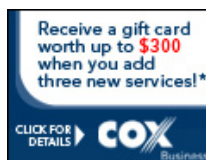
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ASPEN, Colo. - McCarran International Airport is one of most technologically advanced airports in the nation, panelists at last week's Boyd Group International Aviation Forecast Conference said.

High on the list: The airport's remote check-in program enables passengers of Southwest, US Airways, Delta and United airlines to check their bags, for a fee, at the Venetian and Luxor as well as the Las Vegas Convention Center and McCarran's car rental facility south of the airport.

McCarran calls it SpeedCheck Advance and the system drew kudos from panelist Betros Wakim, whose company, AirIT, had a role in setting up the program.

Wakim said McCarran and the airport's busiest carrier, Southwest Airlines, are on the cutting edge of technological advancements that would make air travel more comfortable.

Southwest modified its boarding process nearly a year ago in its bid to attract more business customers. As part of the initiative, Southwest installed work stations at their airport gates so people could power laptop computers to work or check e-mail while they wait.

Next for Southwest: in-flight Internet access, which will be tested later this year.

Wakim and panelist John Presburg, chief executive of BayRunner Shuttle, a ground transportation company operating at Baltimore-Washington International Airport, discussed some of the technology on the horizon.

Concurring that change at the Transportation Security Administration moves slowly, panelists said there are initiatives in place to test scanning technologies. Under one plan, passengers entering security lines could have their identifications scanned with key data compared with databases to speed the process.

Presburg said the Transportation Security Administration experience is often more pleasant at small regional airports than at major hubs, which is one reason remote check-in processes are being explored.

Panelists suggested developing technology that is portable could smooth the security process and shorten lines at high seasonal locations. The theory is that during high seasons, additional equipment could be brought to those airports to serve the higher number of passengers. Since peak seasons differ at various destinations, the equipment could be shuttled to places that need it most.

Such a scenario could come in handy in Las Vegas, for example, whenever conventions with six-figure attendance projections come to town, although McCarran has made tremendous strides in minimizing line waits over the years.

Other technological advances that could make life easier for travelers is being used by some travel booking companies, such as Orbitz.

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Wakim said companies are working toward developing systems that would notify passengers of flight delays, which would keep them from arriving too early and having to wait.

The information is available to customers who call in or log on to an airline's Internet site, but the new objective will be to push the information via e-mail to a cell phone or other telecommunications device.

Panelists concurred the big problem with airlines developing the technology is it's a low priority for most carriers that are focusing more on survival than innovation.

Another issue discussed at the Boyd conference came up at nearly every panel session and presentation: the volatility of fuel prices.

Ben Brockwell, director of data, pricing and information services for the Oil Price Information Service, said airlines are "one event away from a major spike in prices."

Because price volatility is touched by a variety of factors - unstable governments, economic instability, company production goals and catastrophic weather - Brockwell said he could make a case for a future of \$150-a-barrel crude oil as easily as he could make one for \$75-a-barrel prices.

Caught in the middle are the airlines, which are dealing with the problem with what Brockwell describes as "CSI:" conservation, substitution, innovation.

Various carriers are doing everything from reducing weight by carrying fewer nonessentials (potable water, magazines, meal carts), disincentivizing added weight by charging passengers more for additional suitcases, operating planes differently (cutting engine use while taxiing) and adding things like blended winglets on the ends of planes to conserve fuel.

Scott Kirby, president of US Airways, said in many ways airlines are in a good position because they've prepared themselves for the possibility of \$150-a-barrel oil and are making money when the price drops to the \$100 neighborhood as it is now.

US Airways, the second-busiest McCarran operator, is one of the industry leaders in developing ancillary revenue sources to offset higher fuel costs.

In other tourism news:

Alliance support? - McCarran wanted to stay neutral in the new skirmish between British Airways and Virgin Atlantic, two carriers whose disputes are legendary.

But like Al Pacino's Michael Corleone character in "Godfather Part III" who bemoans, "Every time I think I'm out, they keep dragging me back in," the airport found that Gov. Jim Gibbons has taken it out of its Swiss role.

Gibbons, a former Delta Air Lines pilot, was asked to support an airline alliance's antitrust immunity application filed with the U.S. Transportation Department on behalf of British Airways, American, Iberia, Finnair and Royal Jordanian. The airlines want to be able to communicate with each other on schedules, transfers and ticket sales, and they need an antitrust immunity to do so.

The problem is a link between British Airways and American could tie up most of the gates at London's Heathrow International Airport, where Virgin Atlantic wants more access. Virgin has gone to great lengths to oppose the immunity, even painting anti-British Air-American slogans on its planes.

McCarran wanted to maintain its neutrality because it has a strong relationship with Virgin, which offers daily nonstop round trips between Las Vegas and London's Gatwick International Airport. Virgin and McCarran would love for the airline to get more slots

at Heathrow, which could lead to flights to and from the larger and more convenient airport. In addition, it's possible the British Air-American agreement could lead to service from Heathrow to Las Vegas. McCarran simply didn't want to muddy those waters.

But Gibbons did, writing a two-paragraph letter of endorsement dated Sept. 24 to Transportation Secretary Mary Peters.

Now, McCarran is trying to mitigate the damage by asking Clark County Commission Chairman Rory Reid to write a letter stating the airport's position.

Critics are asking why Gibbons would have written the endorsement letter without first consulting McCarran.

New Virgin America flights - Speaking of Virgin, the U.S. arm of Virgin Atlantic, suburban San Francisco-based Virgin America, will offer a second nonstop flight between McCarran and New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport beginning Dec. 11.

The New York-bound flight will leave Las Vegas at 11:45 p.m., arriving the next day at JFK at 7:30 a.m., with a return flight leaving New York at 8 p.m. and arriving in Las Vegas at 10:55 p.m. In addition Virgin will have a seasonal cutback on its existing New York route, eliminating Tuesday and Wednesday departures for a total of 12 flights a week.

Virgin spokeswoman Abby Lunardini said demand has been high on the airline's New York service prompting the additional flight.

In addition, Virgin has begun redemption of free flights through its Elevate frequent-flier program. Customers who became members have been accumulating points when the airline began flying last year, but redemptions didn't begin until this month.

The program offers redemptions on any flight with no blackout dates, and passengers earn five points for every dollar spent, making it possible to get a free flight with four ticket purchases.

No more porn - I recently noted that American Airlines flight attendants were up in arms about passengers downloading pornography since the airline began offering Internet access on some of its transcontinental flights. They took their concerns to airline management, which said it had no plans to install filtering technology to prevent the offensive downloads.

But after being pressured by the religious group Focus on the Family, the airline changed course and will install filtering software.

There's no word on when the installation would occur.

Holiday best - Cheaptickets.com has issued some rather surprising booking data: Las Vegas is ranked highest for upcoming holiday bookings.

For the period of Nov. 24 to Dec. 31, Las Vegas is the top-booked getaway, probably indicating some strong sentiment for the city's annual New Year's Eve celebration. The company offered no data on how bookings compared with last year, but the fact Las Vegas leads the list is encouraging we'll get a decent number of visitors.

Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays aren't normally big sellers for Las Vegas, but New Year's Eve has become a big party on the Strip.

Among the top 10 booked cities listed by Cheaptickets - whose motto is "The less you pay, the better it feels" - Las Vegas has the third lowest average daily room rate behind Orlando and Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

The rest of the top 10 behind Las Vegas are New York; Cancun, Mexico; Orlando; Oahu, Hawaii; Riviera Maya, Mexico; Miami; Chicago; Fort Lauderdale; and Puerto Vallarta, Mexico.

'The Arrival' - Cathay Pacific Airways, one of the airline choices for casino executives traveling to Macau by way of Hong Kong, has opened a lounge at Hong Kong International Airport called "The Arrival."

The new lounge has a buffet dining area, desktop computers with Internet access and Wi-Fi connections, a variety of local and international newspapers and eight fully equipped shower suites.

"The Arrival" joins Cathay Pacific's two departure lounges in Hong Kong, The Wing and The Pier.

Lounges are open to first-class passengers, Marco Polo club members at the gold level or above and one world Emerald passengers on flights operated by Cathay Pacific or Dragonair.

Southwest to D.C. - Last week, I wrote that Southwest Airlines doesn't have nonstop service between Las Vegas and Washington's Dulles International Airport. But it does. Apologies to readers and to Southwest for this miscue.

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