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Speedy Airport Security: Should You Apply?

By **STEPHANIE ROSENBLOOM**

WHO hasn't stood in an airport security line shoeless, beltless, clutching a Ziploc bag and inching grimly toward a full body scanner? A few weeks ago, I decided I'd had enough. I applied for the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Global Entry program, which expedites passenger screening and customs declaration processes for fliers willing to undergo background checks and pay a \$100 fee. If you're already a member, you'll soon be zipping through more airports. If you're not a member, get ready to see a lot more travelers scoot ahead of you in line.

"The applications have grown dramatically," said John Wagner, executive director of Admissibility and Passenger Programs for [Customs and Border Protection](#). When Global Entry, one of several Trusted Traveler programs, began testing at three airports in 2008, Customs and Border Protection was receiving a few hundred applications a month. Today the program receives 25,000 to 30,000 applications a month.

If you are accepted for Global Entry, which expedites customs, you are also automatically qualified for the newer domestic screening program, T.S.A. PreCheck, which often (but not always) means you don't have to remove your shoes, belt and jacket or take your laptop and liquids out of your carry-on. PreCheck is thriving, too. More than three million passengers have been screened since the program began tests last October, and the Transportation Security Administration said it plans to screen about a million passengers a month in 2013. Currently in 26 airports, PreCheck is aiming to be in 35 airports by the end of the year, according to Sterling Payne, a T.S.A. spokesman. (For the basics about Global Entry and PreCheck and the nongovernmental screening program, Clear, check out the Practical Traveler [column](#) that was published on April 18.)

Some in the travel industry are making it more compelling than ever to apply. On Sept. 24, Loews Hotels & Resorts announced that it would be the first hotel chain to pay the \$100 application fee for its approximately 2,400 YouFirst Platinum loyalty rewards apply by Nov. 23. That will cost Loews about a quarter of a million dollars, according to a spokeswoman for the brand. But Jonathan Tisch, chairman of Loews Hotels and a Trusted Traveler, said it's worth it. "We are keenly aware that traveling today



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proposition,” he said. “And we thought that it was in the best interest of our loyal guests that we team up with Homeland Security and Customs and Border Protection to promote programs they have spent a long time figuring out that will speed up the travel process.”

Industry executives think more hotels will follow. Airlines, including American, Delta, United, Alaska and US Airways, have already promoted the programs. But many travelers and public interest groups have serious concerns. Should you apply? To help you decide, here are some of the most common questions about Trusted Traveler, and what the experts have to say.

Are we endangering our civil liberties by sharing our personal information with the government?

When Global Entry members return to the United States after an international flight, they do not fill out customs forms or wait in line to be interviewed by a customs official. Instead, they use an automated kiosk to scan their passports and their fingerprints. The kiosk has a touch screen that enables travelers to answer the customs declaration questions. Then it prints out a receipt for them to take to officials at the baggage claim.

To get this speedy service (along with the perks of PreCheck), you must submit a raft of personal data: your address, employment status, driver’s license, passport and travel history as well as proof of “admissibility,” like a birth certificate. If your online application is conditionally approved, you will then have an in-person interview with a Customs and Border Protection officer and have your picture and fingerprints taken.

For at least one colleague of mine, this engenders thoughts of secret police. Certainly, it concerns public interest groups like the Electronic Privacy Information Center, a research center in Washington that focuses on civil liberties issues. In written [comments](#) to United States Customs, the center said Global Entry raises “substantial privacy and security issues,” like who exactly has access to the information and whether the program satisfies fair information practices (like enabling travelers to see and amend their personal information and ensuring that it is being used only for the purpose for which they provided it). You can learn more at epic.org/privacy.

In a privacy impact assessment available at tsa.gov, the Department of Homeland Security says that the information it collects is necessary for national security, enabling it to ensure that applicants are not on any watch list and that they are not misidentified as someone who is. “It’s really no different than the data we would collect from any one of the millions of people who enter the U.S. each day,” Mr. Wagner said.

The impact assessment contends that the information will be accessed only by people who must

see it to do their jobs and who have passed a background check and completed privacy security training. The Electronic Privacy Information Center has said the department's definition of who can access this information is too broad.

I'm concerned about privacy. At the same time, with the electronic trail that we all leave in the information age, the Global Entry application seemed only slightly more exhaustive than forms I've filled out for things like online banking and renewing my driver's license. Time will tell if I was too trusting.

Doesn't clearing people as Trusted Travelers create an opportunity for criminals to slip through the cracks?

"We do a pretty rigorous background check," Mr. Wagner said, ticking off the sorts of things the government probes like criminal records, watch lists, and customs violations. Applicants' fingerprints are run through F.B.I. and Department of Homeland Security systems, he said. Additionally, members of the programs are still subject to random checks at the airport.

That said, the Electronic Privacy Information Center has noted that criminals with records could potentially collaborate with Trusted Travelers who do not have previous ties to terrorism.

A valid (and chilling) thought. Yet there is some comfort in knowing that even though Trusted Traveler makes navigating an airport less onerous, members and their bags are still screened to ensure safety. There is no bypassing the detectors.

If millions of people are eligible for expedited screening, will it really be all that fast?

Just as priority boarding lines have become interminable thanks to travelers with every kind of status imaginable, one wonders if something similar will happen as Trusted Traveler becomes widespread. The Global Entry process is supposed to take 60 seconds to complete. Not bad. While I have not gone through it myself, other travelers say this is fairly accurate.

As for PreCheck, after a year of testing the T.S.A. is expanding the program to the nation's busiest airports. One of the biggest complaints about PreCheck is that members never know if they will be expedited. The program is not available at every checkpoint in participating airports (a list is at tsa.gov), and sometimes members are simply told to stay on the regular line. Still, David A. Castelveter, director of external communications for the T.S.A., said in a statement that "we have evaluated the results of the pilot program to ensure T.S.A. PreCheck is operationally ready for larger volumes of travelers."

Here's hoping.

