



## BIOMETRIC AIR TRAVEL

# Where Your Face Really Is Your Fortune

By Stephen Challis and Ricardo Letosa

For anyone frustrated by the never-ending need to produce travel documents, passports, boarding cards, declarations, and approvals at multiple checkpoints along the air travel journey, then biometrics is the answer. Fortunately, it is also the future.

Until now, many borders relied heavily on strings of text typed into applications by people who often spoke a different language or used a different alphabet. Critical information such as names and document identifiers were often unreliable, changing for various reasons and without a reliable verification method associated with them. Yet, today's busy and under pressure borders need safe, digital and frictionless immigration processes that facilitate seamless journeys.

Recognizing this evolution, best-practice border solutions today adopt a layered approach, with digitally-enabled risk assessments and pre-clearances undertaken from the moment visas or travel authorizations are arranged, through the entire travel booking and check-in processes, and again at the border itself. Advanced software solutions like SITA's Intelligence & Targeting are, for instance, able to cross reference resources such as government watch lists, passport and visa databases to facilitate the pre-verification of passengers at booking, while passenger data is confirmed in real time at check-in using SITA Advance Passenger Processing.

These solutions greatly enhance the passenger experience, but their effectiveness is underpinned by the collection of biometrics such as fingerprint scans and facial photographs.

### BIOMETRIC AUTHENTICATION

Today we can capture biometrics at the first point in the travel continuum, using a mobile device to read an e-Passport chip and using the device camera to collect a live capture to verify the applicant against the passport. The image collected can be used to check biometric watch lists and then anchor the passenger's identity for the rest of the journey, verifying at each stage of the process that it is indeed the same person travelling.

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national borders using biometrics for identity assurance across the end-to-end process. With biometrics becoming increasingly integral to the modernization efforts of airlines and airports, the enhanced security and overall efficiency affords officials invaluable time to manage possible threats more proactively and effectively.

For passengers, the collection of biometrics reduces stress by enabling fast passage through airports, from check-in and bag drop to boarding, and then facilitating a seamless border experience on arrival.

It is hardly surprising, therefore that the International Air Transport Association's (IATA's) 2023 Global Passenger Survey notes that 75% of passengers would rather use their biometric data than passports and traditional boarding passes. Of those who have been exposed to biometrics technology during their air travels, IATA records an 85% satisfaction rate. When it comes to sharing immigration information to ensure a quicker and easier airport arrival process, the report says a hefty 87% of travellers are willing to share their data, up from 83% in 2022.

Explaining the passenger experience at the release of the 2023 report, IATA Senior Vice President for Operations, Safety and Security, Nick Careen, observed: "Passengers have made it clear: they want to spend less time booking and move through the airport faster. And they are increasingly willing to use biometric data to complete more pre-departure tasks off airport to achieve this."

## A HUNGER FOR CONVENIENCE

This accords with SITA's experience and research, shared in our 2023 Passenger IT Insights report, which shows growing comfort levels with the use of biometrics by passengers across key touchpoints such as security checks, boarding, identity verification, check-in and the overall baggage experience. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the use of biometrics is becoming more commonplace as airports and airlines seek to optimize operations and process passengers as quickly as possible, so they can accommodate more travellers and more flights. In fact, air travel analyst Henry Hartevelde has called 2024 a 'tipping point' year for the uptake of biometrics in air travel.



In 2018, SITA's research showed that 71% of airlines and 77% of airports had significant plans to develop biometric identity management systems. By 2023, many regions had already shown remarkable progress, with some countries leading the way at a 75% implementation rate for biometric borders and a 60% rate for self-check in using biometrics. In 2022, airports saw IT spending surpass expectations and reach 7% of airport revenue; a clear indication of spending priorities. In line with this trend, SITA projects that 70% of airlines will have biometric identity management in place by 2026, and our 2023 Air Transport IT Insights report highlights that "90% of airports are investing in major programs or R&D in this area".

An attractive passenger management solution among airlines and airports alike is SITA Smart Path, a suite of integrated biometric-enabled solutions designed to increase efficiency and create a low-touch passenger experience. SITA Smart Path improves the travel experience by leveraging solutions such as self-service kiosks, baggage-drop technologies and touchless gates for self-boarding, border control and even airport lounge access. The solution can help to board up to 240 passengers in 10 minutes. This, however, is just a drop in the ocean of what is to come.

## DIGITAL TRAVEL CREDENTIALS, TODAY

New standards such as the International Civil Aviation Organization's (ICAO's) Digital Travel Credential (DTC) - a verifiable digital representation of a person's identity - will forever change the nature of global travel. Already, ICAO projects that border processing times will be reduced from the current six to 12 seconds to 2-4 seconds for those passengers using a DTC. In addition, the evolution of the DTC will provide the necessary glue to further join up all the different travel processes internationally.

SITA's vision of a travel future in which outdated paper-based processes are replaced by a DTC is currently being implemented in the Caribbean island nation of Aruba, which



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relies on SITA and partner Indicio's DTC solution to ensure a fast, responsive border experience. This approach to pre-verification, pre-clearance and a touchless digital border with multiple touchpoints across the traveller's journey, represents a game-changing moment for the travel industry.

Aruba is not alone. The considerable investment made by airports and airlines in biometric technology in recent years has been both significant and transformative, both for passengers and the overall operational efficiency of the air transport industry. What started in 2005 as SITA's eGates solution and a focus on self-boarding gates using biometrics and travel documents, has burgeoned into fully-fledged and integrated passenger processing systems enabled by biometrics.

For the traveller, the change has been incremental, affording time to acclimatize to the emergence of a biometric-enabled future, but behind the scenes this seamlessness hinges on interoperability and robust, secure IT systems. As more airports and airlines around the world roll out biometric solutions and advanced IT capabilities such as SITA's industry-leading products, this simplicity will become even more entrenched, transforming the airport space, supporting governments and airlines, and enhancing the passenger experience for the better. ■