

Tulsa passengers try out TSA's full-body scanners

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By Thomas Frank, USA TODAY

TULSA — Here's a glimpse at the future of aviation security: Airline passenger Natalie Miller steps into a glass booth at a checkpoint. She raises her arms. Within moments, a screener asks what is in her back pocket.

Miller is puzzled because she dumped all of her possessions into a plastic bin before entering the booth. Or so she thought. When she reaches into her back pocket, she finds a credit card she left there.

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"That's pretty cool," Miller says of the incident Thursday at Tulsa International Airport, shortly after the screener waved her through. "I thought the machines just detected metal."

David Gustafson of Tulsa is scanned by an imaging machine Thursday at Tulsa International Airport, where some passengers are skipping metal detectors. People are instead being screened in a 9-foot-high portal with glass shields that rotate to produce vivid pictures of what is underneath passengers' clothing.

Not anymore. The 35-year reign of airport metal detectors began its slow descent this week in Tulsa, where for the first time some passengers are skipping metal detectors. People are instead being screened in a 9-foot-high portal with glass shields that rotate to produce vivid pictures of what is underneath passengers' clothing.

The machines use electromagnetic waves to create pictures of energy reflected off people. The metallic-looking images show outlines of private body parts and blur passengers' faces. Two Transportation Security Administration (TSA) screeners in a closed room near the checkpoint view the images on computer monitors and relay information on radio headsets to checkpoint screeners.

The \$170,000 body scanners could be installed at airports around the USA and would close a major security loophole by detecting non-metallic weapons such as plastic and liquid explosives. TSA testing shows the body scanners excel at finding hidden items as small as a plastic button, agency spokesman Christopher White said.

Now the TSA has more questions: How quickly do the scanners operate, and do passengers like them? And will they evoke more privacy concerns from critics who say the machines take security too far, because they can show the outlines of private body parts?

As the TSA expands its test for airports in San Francisco, Miami, Las Vegas, Salt Lake City and Albuquerque in coming weeks, it will be listening to passengers' reactions.

Miller, 34, a sales representative from St. Louis, had no concerns. "It makes me feel a little safer," she said, taking "maybe a few seconds longer — not a big deal."

Tulsa Airport Director Jeff Mulder watched Wednesday when the body scanner was first used and saw little passenger objection or slowdown. "It looked like a relatively normal flow," Mulder said.

But passenger Jim Lesterhold said the body scanner took twice as long as a metal detector takes. "If you were in a crowded airport, it would really slow things up," said Lesterhold, 50, a Houston engineer.

That worries travel advocates. "If you're going to have something that is going to significantly increase the time it takes to go through an airport, that is a real challenge," said Roger Dow, CEO of the U.S. Travel Association. "I'm glad the TSA is testing it."

On Thursday, only two passengers of the 1,039 who were screened before noon in Lane 2 at Tulsa's three-lane checkpoint declined to go through the body scanner, White said.

"It's a little too revealing," said Deborah Newell, who had seen images created by the scanner on local TV news Wednesday. When Newell, 29, a software-project manager from Charlotte, declined to go through the scanner, a female screener gave her a traditional pat-down search.

Kerry Holden, 48, of Miami also opted for a pat-down. She said the machine's electronics might weaken her pacemaker battery.

The images are not sensitive, screeners said.

"They are not pornographic at all," Tulsa screener Debbie Shacklett said. "I don't look at them as people. I look at them as a thing that could have something on it."

Some passengers Thursday said they wished the TSA had posted signs near the body scanner with a reproduction of the image. "I might not have wanted to go through if I had seen that," said Susanne Nicklas of Grove, Okla. "I'm 72, and I don't have the figure I used to."

Signs at the Tulsa checkpoint explain that "use of this technology is optional." White, the TSA spokesman, said the signage emphasizes that passengers can skip the scanners because the agency wants to gauge passenger preference. "We're not trying to hide anything," White said. Images from the body scanners are on the TSA website, www.tsa.gov.

For passengers with metallic hips or knees, the scanners were a relief from metal detectors, which invariably sound alarms that lead to pat-downs. "I walked through, raised my arms and was done," said a beaming Larry Brenden, 43, of Albuquerque. "I was like, what, no pat-down?"

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