

VIP Airport Services: Are They Worth It?

When you're able to hire an escort directly to the front of airport security and immigration lines, why bother with long lines? Growing number of airport concierge companies offer it to fliers, whether they are departing or arriving. Companies such as these provide their services worldwide and are independent of airports and airlines (they have permission from the airports where their services are sold).

As airports have become busier, these types of services have become more popular, according to airline and airport analyst George Hobic, who has used a few of them. They are ideal for travelers who hate waiting in long lines, need directions to get around an airport, or have a tight connection. A concierge is the perfect choice if you like to board the plane just as it's closing, he said. The service also makes you feel as if you are a VIP.

Those who have an international departure and are flying in economy class may particularly benefit from an airport escort, Mr. Hobic said, because they're required to arrive at the airport three hours in advance and have to contend with longer security lines, compared with business and first class fliers who usually have separate security lines. According to him, an airport escort can save you a lot of time.

In addition to offering airport escorts, Royal Airport Concierge is another established company. Since its inception in 2006, it now operates in over 550 airports throughout the world and uses both its own greeters and local companies for its escorting services. Ron Gorfinkel, the founder of the company, said the type of service provided depends on the rules of the airport and the country. For a departure from Italy, for example, a greeter is permitted to escort departing passengers onto the plane and help them stow their carry-on luggage while fliers arriving into London's Heathrow Airport have the option to be met at their gate and taken to customs and immigration in a golf cart, where they are fast tracked through the lanes. Up to four passengers can be transported for \$300 to \$450 for the company.

As someone who is curious about escorting guests to an airport, I attempted an airport concierge service, Blacklane PASS, which was launched by a Berlin-based company in August of last year.

The Basics:

Originally a car service company, Blacklane now provides escorts at 500 airports worldwide through Blacklane PASS. Either the airport itself or a concierge service at the airport employs these escorts. Royal Airport Concierge and Blacklane both provide services based on country and airport regulations. However, according to Jens Wohltorf, its chief executive and co-founder, the company escorts fast track passengers through security, customs and immigration, carries their luggage and helps them process VAT refunds. Additionally, they provide support to arriving passengers at the plane exit, assist them with customs and immigration, as well as bag claim. They can even organize transportation and coordinate with

a driver for curbside pickup.

The Cost:

Each subsequent guest will pay \$100. Children two and under are free. mouse click the following webpage The vast majority of air travelers tip their escorts, but Wohltorf said that tipping is optional.

My Experience:

Several weeks ago, my parents, my children and I flew from Paris Orly Airport to Newark Liberty International Airport using Blacklane PASS. I reserved the service online a week before our trip (first-time customers must reserve online but subsequent bookings can be made online or via phone) and received a text message from our escort, Reda (only permitted to use his first name), the night before our journey introducing himself and asking if I could text him when we were five minutes away from the airport so that he could greet us. After giving us a drop-off point, when we pulled up at the terminal, he welcomed us with a big smile. Reda stacked our four carry-ons and four check-in bags on a luggage cart and guided us forward to the head of the check-in line for the airline we were flying, La Compagnie. Although the line wasn't chaotic, I did feel glee when Reda flashed his pass to an airline employee who promptly let us bypass the others.

After checking in, it was time to claim the VAT refund we'd earned from our Paris shopping. Upon our first contact with the employee dealing with our refund, she informed us that receipts for the goods we purchased were not sufficient for claiming refunds; we needed the actual goods to claim the refund. We had packed most of our shopping in our check-in bags without knowing this rule. In the end, the refund amount amounted to more than \$1000, and it was irresponsible to let it go. Even after demanding an exception, my father and I were unable to get a refund- no items, no refund.

Our representative, Reda, intervened on our behalf, letting her know that we were VIPs. She eventually relented and processed our refund. What would have happened without his assistance?