

airport business

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THE ULTIMATE

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EXPERIENCE

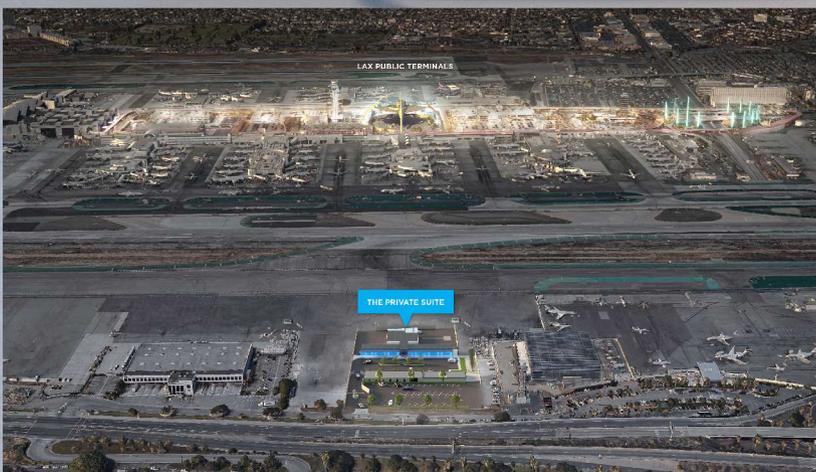
The Ultimate

VIT



TP Experience

Nestled away on the south side of LAX is an oasis for passengers, a boon for the aviation community at large, and quite possibly the most revolutionary idea to land at an airport since the airplane itself. Called The Private Suite, it is the brainchild of international security expert and author Gavin de Becker, and it serves as a model for the mutual benefits that can be achieved through the cooperation of the public and private sector. In brief, The Private Suite is an ultra-private, ultra-high end remote terminal offering the most convenient and secure processing experience for travelers arriving into, or departing from, LAX.





To be sure, The Private Suite is not for everyone: In addition to the membership fee of \$4,500, it carries a per-use fee of \$2,700 for domestic flights, and \$3,000 for international flights. While that pricing may seem out of reach to the average traveler, consider that Heathrow VIP, which pioneered the business model beginning some 17 years ago as the Windsor Suite, charges \$1300 more. Though The Private Suite may appear to cater to only the upper echelons of society, its benefits are far more holistic. In fact, it is difficult to name an airport stakeholder that doesn't benefit by the mere existence of the offering- even for those who may never choose to use The Private Suite. The airport, airlines and even everyday passengers who will likely never see The Private Suite, all benefit from those who use it.

Opened in May, I had the opportunity to use The Private Suite for both my arrival and departure on a recent trip to LAX, and to interview its founder, Gavin de Becker. Both the travel experience afforded by The Private Suite, as well as my interview with de Becker, were nothing short of mesmerizing.

Taxiing in on a warm southern California day in late August, looking out from my row 1 window seat, the only visible sign that this arrival would differ than my past LAX experiences was an impeccably clean silver 7-series BMW waiting airside. As the aircraft blocked in and its engine start levers were moved to cutoff, the BMW crept carefully planeside, its

driver positioning it at the bottom of the crew stairs leading down from the jet bridge. With the aircraft door now opened, all 130 passengers began their miserable salmon-like experience of swimming upstream through the crowds as they made their way to baggage claim, a taxi, or the like. All of 130 of them, that is, except for me. As I stepped through the aircraft door, a muscled secret service-looking individual appropriately adorned in the requisite black suit and tie -complete with ear piece- warmly offered, "Right this way Mr. Wilson." And with those words, I followed him down the outdoor crew steps to the waiting BMW that had been cooled to precisely 64 degrees for my quiet 10-minute drive across the airfield to The Private Suite.

As we made our way across taxiways via the airside access road to The Private Suite, the silence in the BMW amid the roar of nearby Boeing 777s was eerie. Not only did the BMW's soundproofing make for a quiet ride, but the driver and her fellow security professional who met me at the jet bridge spoke not a word and asked no questions. Initially, it seemed odd not to be forced to engage in the usual small talk. "Hot day today, no? How was your flight?" yet during the drive and over the course of the day, I would come to realize and then embrace that The Private Suite isn't as much about luxury, as it is about creating serenity in an otherwise concrete jungle-like travel experience.

Arriving at The Private Suite, I was taken aback not by its opulence, but by its modesty. The building is an industrial-chic single-story affair, comprised of calming, artwork-adorned hallways which pass by a small reception desk before entering into a covered outdoor walkway which then leads to a series of well-appointed suites. Upon entering the suite, one is left with the impression of a high-end hotel, without the obvious focal furniture of a bed or oversized desk. Amenities are placed in logical places throughout the room and include snacks, device charging stations, toiletries, and every beverage or snack one could imagine. Thoughtful touches such as a children's toy menu organized by age is placed on a nearby table. In a discreet corner of the ceiling is a painted compass providing travelers a sense of direction, and for those whose holy land is to the East, the compass offers connectedness to a place on the distant horizon.

To be sure, The Private Suite is luxurious, and caters to any whim one could possibly imagine. But, if you're imagining the hottest gathering place of Hollywood's elite -one in which Tom Cruise and Robert Downey Jr are seated at the bar exchanging laughs over exceptional martinis- think again. It is all in the naming convention: The Private Suite. It is by definition private, not communal. And, there are 13 individual suites - not a central gathering area. If Tom Cruise and Robert Downey Jr are members, they'd never even cross paths during their stay - nor would I cross theirs. During my brief stay I never saw



another soul, save for a few of the eight or so staff members assigned to me that day. And all of it is by design, says founder Gavin de Becker.

Smartly dressed and bespectacled, de Becker appears right out of central casting himself and speaks with the vision of a Jeff Bezos and the hypnotic pentameter of Jeff Goldblum. The Private Suite is an outgrowth of his international security firm Gavin de Becker & Associates (GDBA), which provide security for high net worth individuals, CEOs, heads of state, and even members of the CIA. Yes, GDBA serves the CIA - which should give some sense of the level of privacy and security afforded members of his newest offering.

The Private Suite was eight years in the making, says de Becker. "We made 100 visits to overseas airports- London, Munich, Frankfurt, Dubai- to experience every airport VIP system we could. To see what we might want to emulate, and to see what wasn't working well. In all of that work, London Windsor Suite at Heathrow- now called Heathrow VIP- just dominated in terms of service. And though it has private rooms, guests don't get their own bathrooms or food-service pantries like ours do. Certainty the most beautiful is the Al Majlis Lounge in Dubai Airport, but it's not private; it's communal. Likewise, Munich has the VIP Wing, but it's also communal, has an unattractive décor, and is trying achieve a party-like atmosphere. I don't think that's why people go to the airport [for a communal experience]. I don't think anyone

on the way to the airport is interested in doing anything but boarding their flight." Armed with that laser-focused thesis, de Becker set about the leasing process with the Los Angeles World Airports (LAWA) to secure a leasehold at LAX to create The Private Suite.

For an airport, the notion of a privately-run remote terminal in which passengers are screened by TSA and international arrivals are processed by CBP, and subsequently driven airside in BMWs directly to aircraft, requires a forward-thinking airport authority. Yet, that's what de Becker found in LAWA, because he was providing a solution to a multitude of problems that seemed unsolvable. And that solution would not only benefit LAWA but virtually every stakeholder in the greater LAX aviation community.

De Becker explains, "One of the issues facing LAX was the reduction of congestion for the tens of thousands of regular passengers who every week were effected by paparazzi. Outside the terminal, the sidewalk is blocked, the doors are blocked, there is screaming going on, pushing and shoving. Then, if you put Tom Cruise through the TSA line, everybody pulls out their iPhone, the line stops moving forward, people begin leaning and pushing- it changes the whole environment profoundly."

By removing celebrities, heads of state, and other well-known individuals from the general public who already face long lines at TSA, all parties benefit. The paparazzi no longer block the doors at LAX to snap photos of celebrities.

That distraction now removed, TSA lines move more quickly for the general public. And the celebrity gets (and pays for) things they value highly: peace and privacy. The pitfalls of the celebrity lifestyle, and de Becker's tale about photographers in particular, would soon be brought into focus during my departure from LAX later that day.

Smoother flowing TSA lines and fewer security concerns are only some of the benefits to LAX. There are other intangible benefits as well explains de Becker. Simply put, "Having a high-end experience available at your airport elevates your whole airport. For example, if there's a beautiful \$10,000 a night 'Presidential Suite' on top of a hotel- though you and I might not stay in it- the whole hotel is elevated by the offering." Also, de Becker is repatriating premium airline passengers back to the airport, people who have been chartering for years. This dynamic has also made The Private Suite enormously popular with the 71 airlines that serve LAX. To date, 70 of those 71 air carriers have executed agreements to permit passenger transit to their aircraft via The Private Suite. Says de Becker, "We are boarding passengers the airlines weren't seeing before. We are bringing passengers to fill their premium cabin who weren't flying commercial. We've had a lot of people come through who said 'I haven't flown commercial in 5 years.'"

Returning to the airport as beneficiary, de Becker notes several qualitative -and one very quantitative- reason an airport may wish to con-

sider a tenant such as The Private Suite as a potential lessee. During construction- which was lauded as setting an unofficial speed record for LAX (a mere 10 months from breaking ground to occupancy) some million feet of fiber optic cable was pulled into The Private Suite, along with all screening equipment desired by TSA and CBP. As a result, The Private Suite doubles as a fully operational remote screening facility, allowing TSA or CBP opportunities to test innovative new technologies and techniques in a lower stakes environment than the main terminal screening area.

De Becker further notes a pilot program currently underway at The Private Suite: processing foreign flight crews for an unnamed international air carrier. Here again, de Becker's thesis is compelling: "Even at just the six flights we're currently testing, more than 7,000 individual TSA and CBP processing events are being removed from the main terminals each month." Adds de Becker, "And of course, that means 7,000 fewer people standing in TSA and CBP lines and a huge reduction in vehicle congestion caused by all those hotel shuttles that have to circle the 'horseshoe' [airport terminal] multiple times at LAX when picking up the arriving flight crew, and dropping off the outbound crew."

For an airport, by removing celebrities and the paparazzi that follow them, as well as large contingencies of foreign flight crew from the main terminal, The Private Suite brings greater predictability to the screening process for the general public, along with reduced wait times.

Quantitatively, no analysis would be complete without the monetary equation. Through a combination of privilege fees, monthly leasehold payments and Minimum Annual Guarantees (MAGs), LAWA will receive some \$39M over the next 9 years as a result of The Private Terminal. And, as de Becker emphasizes, "They [LAWA] get a brand new remote screening facility, all built with private funds."

In terms of growth, de Becker notes that there are certain airport markets that lend themselves to an expansion of The Private Suite. Though he concedes LAX has its own unique set of variables, much of it driven by a high population of celebrities that live in the LA basin, airports such as JFK or MIA with their high numbers of international flights, concentration of wealth, and diplomatic travelers may stand to benefit from such a tenancy. Regarding



desired leasehold criteria de Becker states, "We like to be on a different street to the main airport, or at least prior to the airport, meaning you would reach us before you have to go in to the airport traffic. Obviously, we also need be right on the AOA and or have direct [airside] access. Because we drew in 1 million feet of fiber optic cable for TSA and CBP, we'd like to be closer in than farther out. But, if farther gets our members out of traffic, we're happy because the extra three to four minutes you spend driving across the tarmac, you get that back in spades when you leave the airport."

Speaking of leaving the airport, it was my time to depart The Private Suite. I had spent the better part of three hours working in complete tranquility, enjoying a meal and any beverage my heart desired. At 3:41pm precisely, a mere 40-minutes before actual departure I was escorted the few steps to the private security suite to be screened by unusually friendly TSA personnel. There was no one in line in front of me, or behind. In short order I had exited the facility, entered another silver BMW, and was riding across the airfield toward my aircraft.

The process reversed, we approached the jet bridge to my departing flight creeping slowly alongside the aircraft. Despite the tinted windows of the car, I could feel the curious eyes fixated upon me from the majority of passengers already onboard the plane. Instinctively (and in true Hollywood style) I reached for my sunglasses before exiting the car and ascending the jet bridge from the airside area. With a security detail in front of and behind me, the personnel door to the jet bridge was opened before me, and

the lead agent's powerful hand gently parted the masses of remaining passengers congregating at the aircraft door, allowing me to pass. Having witnessed my arrival a passenger in the jet bridge asked me "Are you famous or something?" Peering through my sunglasses, I couldn't help but play the part for him. "I'm not that famous, I guess," I coolly answered. Stepping into the cabin of the airplane, I saw two passengers clasping iPhones positioned to capture a picture of me as I boarded, followed by the bright confirmatory flash of their cameras a second later.

Immediately I realized that while novel for me, this was the painful downside of fame to which de Becker alluded. As private citizens, privacy is our expectation. Yet for a moment, I had experienced a loss of privacy. While initially electrifying to be mistaken for a celebrity, the unauthorized photos taken of me as I boarded left an acidic, almost metallic aftertaste in my mouth, one that was most displeasing.

As ordinary travelers, we feel a loss of privacy each time we reveal the holes in our socks as we pass through TSA, are patted down, or asked about metal inside our bodies from a past surgery. For celebrities, that loss of privacy is a constant narrative punctuated by flash bulbs and autograph seekers, an unbroken chain of intrusions and interruptions. Airports partnering with lessees like The Private Suite will not only find a subset of passengers willing to pay for privacy, but a novel solution to several interconnected issues facing them today.

