

Miami airport: A launching pad to international adventure

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

It's a place of dreams and myth, adventure and mystery. It's the launching pad to international adventure and just a bit of intrigue. Yes, it's dowdy and worn out, overcrowded and a bit hectic, but I still love it.

It's Miami International Airport, the jumping-off place for thousands of travelers a day who dart around the country on business or for pleasure or who jet set to some more exotic destination such as Macchu Piccu, Manuel Antonio Beach, Ushuaia or Eleuthera.

Every time I read a story which criticizes Miami's gateway to the world, I cringe and feel a bit sorry for it, some what like when one feels a pang of sympathy for an aging relative who can't remember what day it is or where they put their glasses but is still active and can tell the best stories about what it was like in their day.

Where else can one sit for just 30 minutes and watch the world go by: Nicaraguans, Argentineans, Ecuadorians, Germans, British, Jamaicans and others wander up and down the concourse with a babble of languages, variety of dress and a world of experiences far greater than those of the normally state-side based U.S. citizens.

Of course there is New York's JFK airport and London's Heathrow, both of them steeped in international travel and adventure. But for me, Miami is the place.

It was here I began my international adventures with a quick weekend hop to Aruba to interview for a position. The job didn't work out, but I was hooked on lands south of the U.S. border and I knew that MIA was what you had to have on your luggage tags to get anywhere else!

It was from here that we flew the old Braniff airlines with their brightly painted Calder airplanes and stylishly dressed stewardesses to several years of work and life in Panama, and later residency in Costa Rica and Ecuador.

From here we have joined millions of other holiday makers as we have flown out to the Bahamian out-islands for a week of R & R, Puerto Rico for meetings and conferences, Jamaica for work and play.

MIA is also a welcome destination for the weary overseas traveler who is anxious to get back to something familiar--language, food, culture and newspapers.

For years, an "inside" secret passed around among expatriates was the Burger King restaurant tucked away on an upper level of concourse E where the hungry traveler could buy typical U.S. food at a lower cost than those charged by the high-price restaurants on the main concourse. As one enjoyed their hamburgers and french fries, what better place to watch the large 757's, 747's and Airbuses come and go?

Every time I land at MIA I feel a twinge of excitement and adventure. Coming to a halt on the north side of the airport, I look over at the old DC9's, the 707's and some even older aircraft, and I remember that it was here, on the backside of the airport that the CIA ran (and maybe still runs) several clandestine operations into Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador and who knows how many other places.

I can just picture the planes lumbering down the runways, taking to the skies filled with middle-aged soldiers of fortune ready to drop into some remote landscape, dodging gun-fire and mortar attacks. It all looks so calm now, but behind those old rusting hulks of aircraft, I just imagine the stories they could tell and wonder what they are hiding today.

Bouncing back to reality, as I watch the waiting passengers walk up and down the concourse, I wonder what their stories are? Displaced refugees from Cuba or Haiti waiting for relatives or on their way back home? Diplomats and political operatives winging their way to a foreign capital to negotiate an agreement? Business people flying to Buenos Aires to ink their latest deal?

Missionaries on their way back to another term of service in the Amazon or the heart of one of Latin America's mega-cities? Vacationers looking for a break on a beach or adventure hiking the Andes? Perhaps sons and daughters going back home to visit family and friends once more in a land which is now foreign to them.

Is Miami's airport old, dingy, in need of a face-lift? Probably so. Is it antiquated, too small, too confusing? Perhaps.

But with all it's frailties, it is still the stepping stone to adventure, international knowledge, family reunions, world changing events and daily stories which could fill a novel. It is

definitely much more exciting than those other architectural masterpieces which handle only a few hundred flights a day and none with even a twinge of the exotic.

Miami airport: A launching pad to international adventure, Jan 1, 1980