

TRAVEL APPS – MOBILE PASSPORT CONTROL

by Chase Binder

Technology has revolutionized the world of travel over the past 15-20 years. We can now “look and book” almost anything right from our smart phones—flights, hotel rooms, train travel, car rentals...even luxury villas around the world. No need for pesky paper tickets (remember the fear of losing paper plane tickets?) or hotel confirmations.

The process for re-entering the country also used to be entirely based on “hard copy”. You needed not only an actual physical passport, but also a paper US Customs and Border Protection declaration form giving details

on where you are coming from, what (if anything) you are bringing back with you, what your passport number is and so on. Think back to your last flight coming home from abroad and remember the flight attendants scurrying up and down the aisles handing out the forms, repeating “only one per family is required” and “no, I don’t have an extra pen” over and over. Then you negotiate with a family member to decide who is going to stand up and retrieve their passport and find a pen to fill out the form. Such fun.

Not anymore! There is now an app called Mobile Passport Control (MPC) that allows you to scan your way into the country—at least partially. (If you don’t know what an app is or have never downloaded an app to your tablet or smart phone, stop reading now and call one of your grandkids.) MPC is available for Apple and Android smart phones and tablets and works at 26 US international airports and 3 seaports of entry. Don’t worry—Boston, Miami, NYC and most of the ones we New Hampshireites use for international travel are included.



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Note that MPC does NOT replace your passport—it merely replaces the paper customs and immigration form. Nor does it replace the Trusted Traveler international programs (Global Entry, Nexus and Sentri) which require background checks, fees and interviews. MPC does NOT require any interviews or background checks and is free—sort of. There are two levels of MPC apps. One is free, but doesn’t store any profile info. Hence, every time you re-enter the US, you have to enter your passport info all over again, you just get to do it on your mobile device instead of paper. Is this easier/speedier than filling out a paper form? Maybe, maybe not. But you still get to use the speedy MPC quick lanes.

The “Plus” level of MPC costs \$14.95 to download, but allows you to set up profiles for multiple family members, thereby storing all the personal passport info needed for the form—except your incoming flight, date, and so on, which will still need to be entered into your mobile device. Lots easier and absolutely safe and secure, so they say.

So...suppose you have Global Entry? Do the two work together? Again...sort of. They are not interchangeable. Having an MPC QR code won’t get you through the Global Entry Lane. But if you have Global Entry AND an MPC QR code, you can use either lane—depending on which is less congested.

To add another wrinkle, many airports have added Automated Passport Control (APC) as another alternative to filling out paper immigration/declaration forms. These are just another set of kiosks where you use touch screens to enter your information, scan your passport, take your photograph and use another, hopefully speedier, entry lane.

Now for the big question: is any of this worth the trouble? It’s a personal, and open, question. Bud and I both have Global Entry, something we consider critical to re-entry into the US, especially Boston’s Logan Airport as we are often scrambling to make a bus back to NH. I decided to go for the MPC Plus, just to see how it works. After quite a bit of fussing, I got profiles set up for both us, got our passport info entered and got it password protected. The app is not the most user-friendly, but I got it done. As for whether it’s functional—I’ll report next month after we come back from Aruba.



Look for this icon/logo to find the speedy Mobile Passport Control lanes.

The main function of the MPC is to eliminate the Customs and Border Protection paper form and, thereby, speed up your re-entry into the US. How does it work? It allows you to fill out the form on your phone or tablet via the MPC app, after which you receive electronic receipt with an Encrypted Quick Response (QR) code. You then bring your actual passport and your mobile device with your digital QR code to the specially marked entry lanes and, voila, you are back in the USA via a streamlined process. Perhaps you’ve noticed the new blue MPC logos with lanes that allow you bypass the main hordes at the airport.

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