

# TRAVEL TALK - FLYING OUT OF MANCHESTER

BY CHASE BINDER

If you've been in central New Hampshire as long as Bud and I have (say, 35+ years), you might have a memory or two of the old Manchester airport. Remember the small, low-ceilinged place with no baggage carousel—just some doors that opened onto a metal slide? Baggage handlers tossed your bags through the doors and they slithered down and landed on the floor in a heap. Security checkpoints? Not so much!

Fast forward three or four decades and Manchester Airport (MHT) is a whole new world—a world that began with the opening of the new terminal in 1994. I remember being elated to have modern check-in counters and even three “real” baggage carousels. From then on, MHT hit a new milestone about every 5 years. In 1999 the parking garage opened (no more shoveling snow off your car!) and 2 million passengers used MHT. In 2006, that number hit a record 4.3 million passengers and the following year MHT was officially re-named Manchester-Boston Regional Airport.

Turns out that the 4.3 million high point was the result of some confounding variables. In the early 2000's Boston's Big Dig had the effect of diverting a lot of Boston traffic to MHT. Low-cost breakout Southwest Air was flying out of Manchester, but not Boston—yet. In 2006 and the years after, Southwest moved into Boston. The Big Dig wrapped up. Some Boston folks went back to their “own” airport. We had the market crash of 2008 and the beginning of many airline consolidations and other industry changes.

Passenger levels have now stabilized at around 2.3 million, give or take. Disaster for our own MHT? Not hardly. Management saw what was happening, kept a careful eye on the industry, and approached improvements and expansion with common sense and fiscal responsibility. Instead of wringing their hands (or worse, over-building), they kept investing in key improvements for passenger safety, security and comfort. As Tom Malafronte, the airport's Deputy Director says,



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“our mission is to look for ways to make travel more efficient and convenient.” I won't bore you with info on longer runways, solar projects to reduce energy costs and such—though, trust me, there's lots to talk about. Nope, I'll go right to stuff that impacts how easy it is to navigate the airport and how comfortable and convenient the place is.

Last week, for example, I wanted to greet inbound friends from Florida personally. I could have used the popular cell phone lot, waited for them to call and picked them up curbside, but I wanted to surprise them in the airport itself. I zipped into the newly-reopened hourly parking lot and ran into the terminal—an easy 2-3 minute walk. Try that in Boston!

The hourly lot had been closed while the rental car desks were moved from the area adjacent to the main baggage claim to the lower level of the parking garage. The spiffy new area is a much more efficient pick-up and drop-off area and, happily, makes room for an incoming Starbucks near the baggage claim. Sweet!

Most noticeable is a significant “passenger flow improvement” project to upgrade and expand the TSA screening area at the top of entrance escalators in the main terminal area. This will consolidate the two separate screening areas into one more efficient area—easier to staff, easier (and safer) for passengers. More room for queuing, so no more lines snaking back down the

stairs and escalators! And for fun, the observation area (closed during construction) will re-open with added features. Work began in April and will be completed by Thanksgiving. Meantime, screening might take a bit longer, so Malafronte suggests allowing two hours for check-in, especially during peak travel times.

But there's more. If you're a nursing mom, there's been a private room on the lower level for a while. But now there's an extremely cool and private “Mamava” nursing suite (visit [mamava.com](http://mamava.com)) on the secure side of the airport near Gate 6.

And there's been an outside pet relief area at the north end of the airport for some time, but now there's a pet relief area inside the airport (secure side, lower level near Gates 4 & 5). This will be great for service dogs or people who have dogs small

enough to take to the skies.

When I travel I think about staying connected and keeping my tummy full. MHT was one of the first to have free Wi-Fi and those uber-convenient charging/seating areas, and Malafronte says more are coming. As for food, the re-do of the security screening area will include re-vamping access to the nearby concessions. In addition, the airport stand-by Hudson News has re-branded as Hudson with much expanded offerings including (yay!) a great selection of “grab and go” eats to take on the plane.

You can learn lots more at [fly-manchester.com](http://fly-manchester.com), but I'll leave you with one word to describe management's approach—thoughtful. The next time you fly MHT, you'll realize that somebody actually thought things through. Imagine!



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