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Self-Service Border Control

Summertime and air travel is anything but easy. Instead, it's more likely to be marked by numerous delays and queues at airports—that is, unless you're heading to Portugal with an electronic passport in hand. The country is leveraging the use of e-passports, which have embedded RFID chips, to speed travelers through border-control lines.

E-passports have been issued by more than 30 governments, including Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, Singapore, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States and, of course, Portugal, to improve security. Each RFID chip stores a digital photo of the passport holder and other biographic details that can be checked at a border point when the document is opened and held close to a secure reader.



In spring 2007, Portugal tested a system called RAPID at Faro Airport, the country's second international gateway after Lisbon Airport, and earlier this year the system was introduced into all Portuguese international airports as well as seaports. RAPID, conceived by Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras (SEF), the Portuguese border-control authority, can perform the same passport check as a human immigration officer—but in approximately 20 seconds.

RAPID consists of VBeGate, a fully automated electronic border-control gate developed and produced by Lisbon-based Vision-Box, and a biometric verification unit. The system checks the authenticity of the e-passport by validating the data stored in the chip, and then a live facial scan is compared with the image read from the e-passport. If a discrepancy is found, a dedicated border officer is alerted to carry out a manual inspection.

Roughly 2,000 travelers use the RAPID system every day, which also benefits people with standard passports, who are seeing

shorter border-control lines. So far, more than 100 gates have been deployed, allowing Portugal to improve the efficiency of its border control without having to increase trained staff.

This summer, the United Kingdom, which has issued more than 8 million e-passports, is piloting a similar system at London's Gatwick airport. If successful, the technology will be rolled out across the country's airport border control points. Clearly, this is a smart way for governments to leverage an infrastructure—and an investment—designed primarily to secure international travel. It not only makes border control more efficient but also delivers tangible benefits to e-passport holders.

Maybe the RAPID system won't help you out this summer, but as Portugal leads the way, self-service border control will provide fast and reliable clearance at many international airports.

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