

Getting back to business travel

At the airport – London Heathrow T5 in focus

Rollover  to view more information.

To give people the confidence to resume travel, measures have already been rolled out by suppliers, regulators and other organizations to ensure they can do so safely, with a much-reduced risk of exposure to COVID-19. And more measures are on the way.

As part of their efforts to reassure their customers and give them the confidence to resume travel, airlines and airport operators around the world are hosting events to showcase what the new experience looks like. This report is based on a recent visit made on July 23, 2020, to London Heathrow's Terminal 5 (T5) hosted by British Airways.

Some of the changes Heathrow Airport and British Airways have made will be temporary, simply to restart travel, or may evolve as the pandemic runs its course; others may become permanent features of the airport experience. Passengers will see airports and their airline tenants adopting many common measures, but there will be differences too, reflecting local conditions and regulations as well as the efforts of airlines to differentiate their products in a COVID-19 world.





Arriving at the airport

Traveler wellbeing

Even before entering the terminal, as passengers take the lift/elevator to the departures level, signs provide a visual reminder of the need to wear a face covering at all times.



All passengers are channeled to a single entry point into the terminal, where they are encouraged to use one of a number of touchless hand sanitizer dispensers provided by the airport operator. As everyone feels obliged to stop and sanitize, this might cause congestion as passenger numbers increase. British Airways has also stationed its own touchless hand sanitizer stations throughout the terminal.

Passengers then pass through an unobtrusive thermal temperature check before entering the check-in zone. The airport is currently trialing new screening systems to aid the detection of elevated body temperatures. The information these systems gathered is not stored, shared or used for any purpose other than promoting the safety of passengers and airport/airline employees.

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Cleaning and sanitization

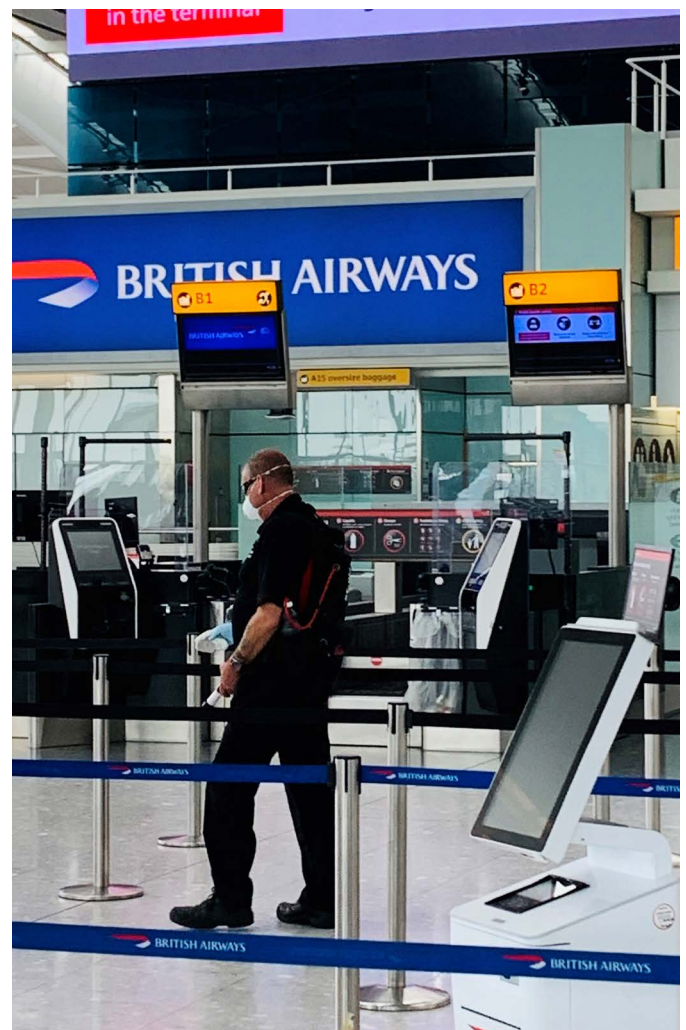
Heathrow Airport has deployed two UVD Robot cleaning robots in Terminal 5 and two more in Terminal 2. In each terminal, one machine is used landside and the other airside to provide a daily clean.

The machines use ultraviolet light to autonomously mop concourse floors and clean toilets. Over a two-minute period, the UVD Robot kills most germs and bacteria within a 3-meter diameter.

Elsewhere, cleaners are evident regularly sanitizing and disinfecting high-touch points and surfaces at check-in, security/immigration and in the lounges.



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Social distancing and protection

The airport has made good use of digital signage, converting advertising boards to remind passengers of the measures it's introduced and the precautions they should be taking, such as washing their hands regularly.

Social distance signs have been used to block seating.



There is little evidence of social distancing floor markers being used. This is because most have been removed as social distancing seems to have become entrenched behavior among many people. Floor markers have been replaced by vertical stands, which can be moved as advice on social distancing changes. These signs currently remind passengers to keep a minimum of two meters apart when queuing.



Observing the people in the terminal, it seems that almost all passengers and staff are wearing masks. There are one or two exceptions, as well as some people struggling to use a mask to cover both their mouth and nose at the same time.

Checking in

While self-service kiosks are not touchless, BA provides hand sanitizer and sanitizing wipes at each station.

The airline mandates a temperature check for all travelers, and this is more obvious than the approach being trialed by the airport operator. Anyone failing the test is given ten minutes to cool down before having their temperature retaken. Should a passenger fail for a second time, they will be unable to travel as planned, but BA's *Book with Confidence* scheme offers rebooking flexibility for any affected passengers.

All check-in desks are equipped with transparent, protective screens. While many check-in staff wear masks, BA has not made this mandatory, as the screens provide adequate protection and the absence of a mask may help to reassure customers.



Operational adjustments

To improve connections among its joint business partners, British Airways (BA) has now welcomed both American Airlines (AA) and Iberia to Terminal 5, with AA having moved over from Terminal 3 on July 1. This is part of a semi-permanent terminal consolidation and reduces the passenger journey within the airport estate, e.g. passengers connecting between AA and BA can now do so within the same terminal.



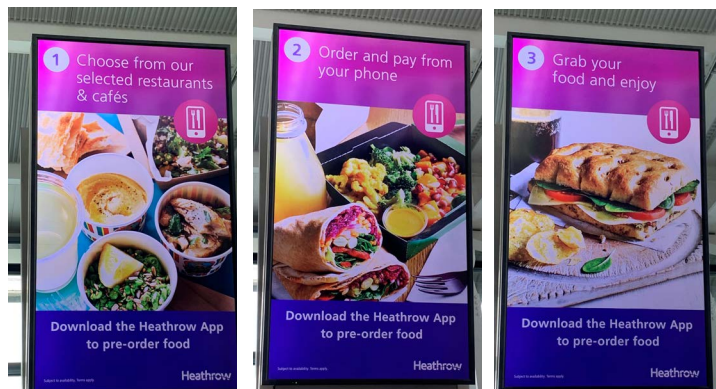
In the departure lounge



Most shops and restaurants/takeaways are open, but entry is controlled, and capacity limits are in place.

The airport encourages passengers to download the Heathrow App to pre-order food from selected restaurants and cafes in a simple, three-step

process. Passengers can order and pay for food and beverages from their mobiles. Passengers can also top up their own water bottles using contactless drink dispensers.



While most people wear masks when moving around the terminal building, few wear them when they're seated, even if they're not consuming food or beverages or are seated close to other passengers.

Although the departure lounge already feels quite busy, the airport is operating at a much-reduced capacity (only Terminals 2 and 5 and one runway are currently open). As demand grows, reopening Terminals 3 and 4 will ensure overcrowding doesn't quickly become a problem.

Airline lounge experience

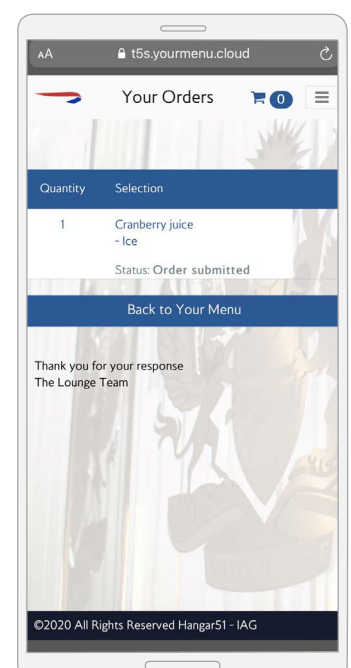
Entry to BA's business class airport lounge is now contactless.

Lounge staff have been split into separate cleaning and serving teams in order to prevent cross-contamination and to maintain the highest standards of hygiene and customer service.

There is no buffet or self-service in any BA lounge at Heathrow. Instead, each table displays its own unique QR code. Scanning the code takes passengers to a web page where they can register, enter the code of the day, and then order complimentary food and beverages, which are delivered to their location. It's simple to use and has proved to be popular with both customers and staff. The menu has been reduced, but it is still described (by BA) as comprehensive.

Some furniture has been removed, while fabric-covered items have been removed in favor of leather, which is easier to keep clean and sanitize. Some glass partitions have been installed between tables. Customers are not required to wear a mask when seated; but they have been asked to minimize their movement around the lounge.

Showers are still open and are sanitized after every use.





Onboard

BA boards its flights by seat row from back to front. Passengers should self-scan their boarding pass and passport. Where this is not possible, i.e. where the gate agent handles either item, hand sanitizer is provided. Staff handling BA passengers at outstations receive the same guidance as BA's Heathrow staff to ensure consistent delivery of service and the same hygiene experience.

Aircraft are cleaned on every turnaround and when parked overnight at Heathrow and down route. This involves deep cleaning and wiping down all high-touch surfaces.

As they board the aircraft, all passengers receive a personal hygiene kit, containing hand sanitizer, a sanitizing wipe and a sealed bag for safely disposing used tissues or masks. On board, BA has provided hand sanitizer stations in galleys for use by passengers and crew.

The food and beverage offering has been changed to minimize interaction between cabin crew and passengers. Food is pre-packaged or boxed, while alcoholic spirits are served as miniatures rather than from the bottle. Blankets are removed after each flight and replaced with blankets sealed in plastic.

It is mandatory for passengers to wear masks onboard all BA flights. Each flight carries spare masks available for passengers who need to replace a damaged mask (or if the flight unexpectedly exceeds the four-hour mask-wearing limit BA recommends).

Disembarkation follows a similar process to boarding and is conducted by group or seat number. Cabin crew have been trained to deal with the social distancing risks of people standing up as soon as the aircraft arrives on stand, and they will use announcements to ensure passengers behave appropriately.

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Pre-packaged meal images credit to British Airways



Arrivals



On arrival at Heathrow Airport, signs remind passengers that they must complete a digital locator form, which can be downloaded by scanning a QR code, before they can enter the U.K. The signs also advise passengers arriving from a country not on the U.K. Government's safe corridor list that they must self-isolate for 14 days or risk a fine of up to £1,000. Other signs remind of the need to socially distance, wear masks and wash hands regularly.

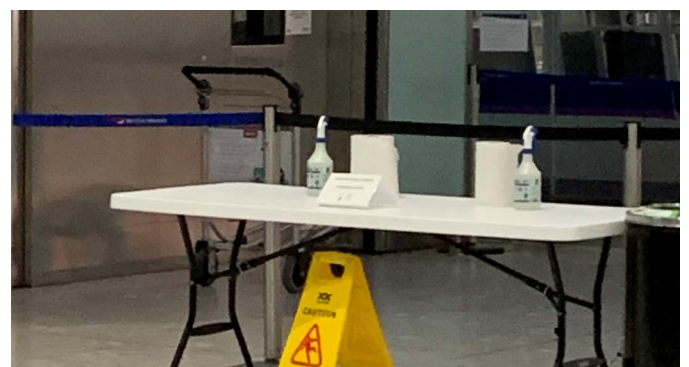
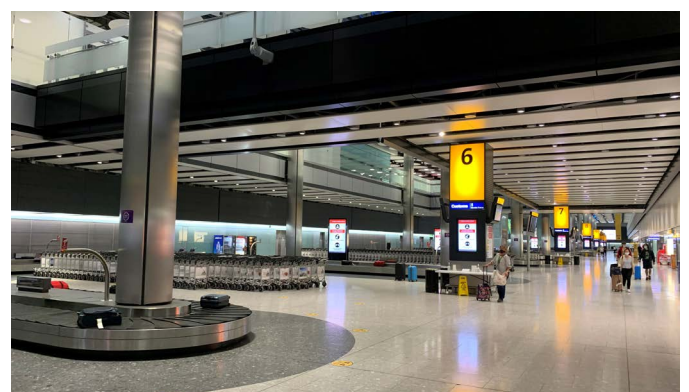
A more contactless experience has been introduced in the Flight Connections center, limiting the amount of contact between passengers and airline staff. As passenger volumes grow, social distancing combined with mask wearing should be sufficient to protect passengers, but further adaptations to the experience may be required.

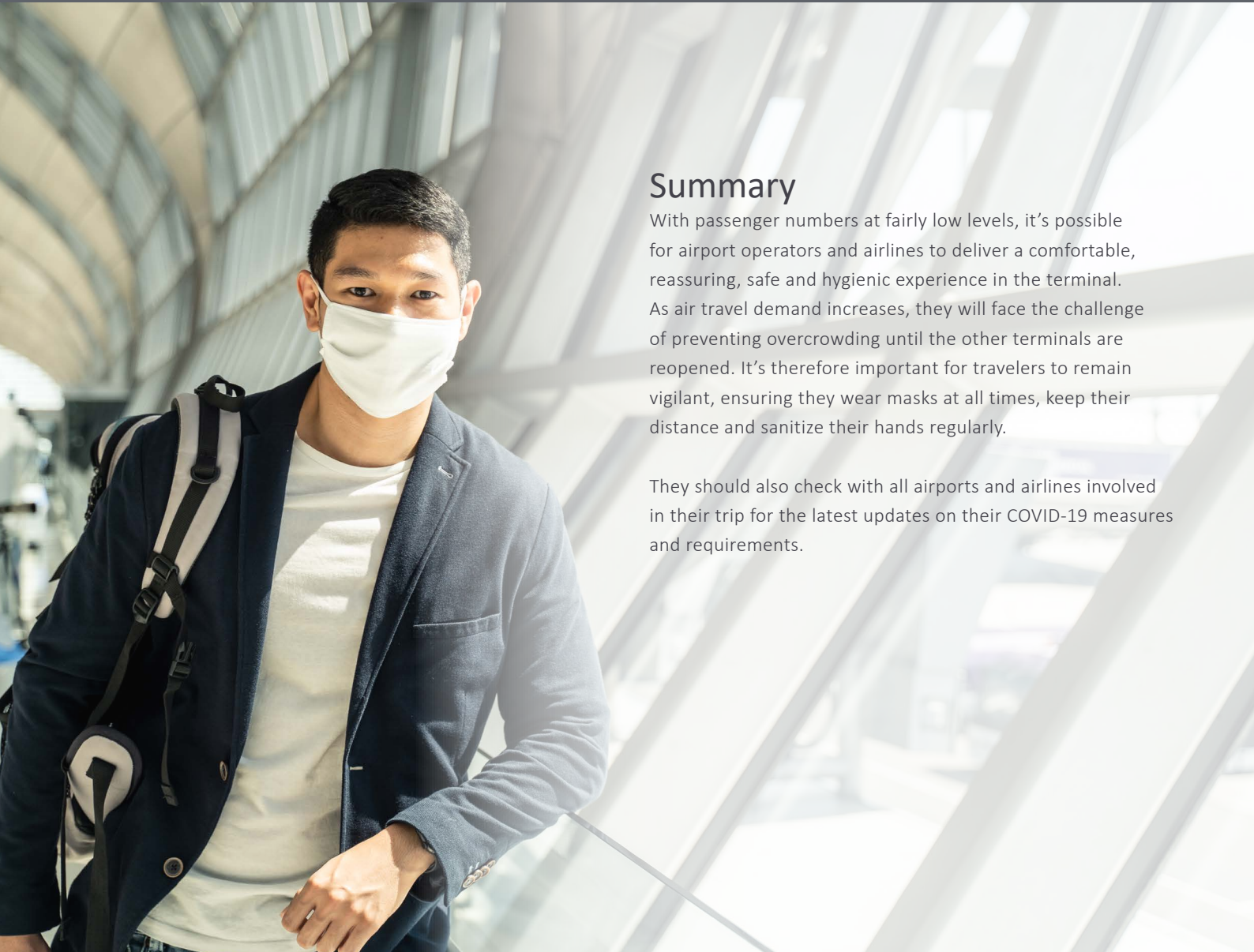
With passport e-gates currently closed, all passengers must queue to be checked individually by an immigration officer. While people are able to maintain their distance from passengers in front and behind them, as the queue doubles back on itself, social distancing with passengers on either side is impossible.

Baggage retrieval

BA has yet to require passengers to check in all bags. The airline wants to maintain a balance between the number of bags passengers bring into the cabin and those they check in to the hold. It believes this should help minimize the risks of overcrowding in the baggage halls, which could result if all bags were checked in.

The original, spaced U-shape design of the baggage carousels in Terminal 5 means there is already a lot of space, which should help passengers maintain their distance as the terminal becomes busier. After collecting their bags from the carousel, sanitizer stations have been set up for passengers to disinfect their hands and baggage handles.





Summary

With passenger numbers at fairly low levels, it's possible for airport operators and airlines to deliver a comfortable, reassuring, safe and hygienic experience in the terminal. As air travel demand increases, they will face the challenge of preventing overcrowding until the other terminals are reopened. It's therefore important for travelers to remain vigilant, ensuring they wear masks at all times, keep their distance and sanitize their hands regularly.

They should also check with all airports and airlines involved in their trip for the latest updates on their COVID-19 measures and requirements.

Do you have questions or comments regarding this report? Please email [Mike Eggleton](mailto:mike.eggleton@bcdtravel.com) to share your thoughts.



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