

ATA article for April 2018

Greetings from Ontario, Canada!

As I write this article, I am en route via AIR CANADA flight between Toronto and Phoenix on my way to Tucson for Executive Committee meetings and the Spring Grand.

Travel by air with a competition shotgun is always challenging. I have talked to many Ontario shooters and have given them some tips that I hope helped make the process a little easier. I have previously written about the difficulties that many people have experienced particularly with Air Canada and Pearson International (Toronto) – especially Terminal One.

If one takes a moment to just observe passengers, you will notice that many people appear stressed and resigned to a process that even without firearms can take hours before ever reaching the flight gate. Sort of reminds me of watching joggers. Most are grim-faced, seldom if ever smile and simply endure the brutal process that leads to the eventual result they expect to achieve.

In this article, I will lay out the procedures that most travelers by air with firearms will experience. I have some suggestions which may help:

1. Make sure you have your valid ATF permit that will authorize you to temporarily import firearms into the U.S.A. Apply well in advance of your intended trip date. From the time you submit your application, the estimated processing time is 3-5 weeks. Sometimes your application is returned for amendments. This will add to the processing time. The ATF staff is very good and quite cooperative. Leave yourself lots of time to get your ATF permit.
2. If you use a travel agent, most are not familiar with firearm issues. Ask your agent if there are any special rules for transporting a firearm with your chosen carrier. Also ask the price – for instance, Air Canada will charge \$50.00 handling fee plus H.S.T. for a firearm. If you purchase your ticket online, do your research before you buy it.
3. Procedures, I expect, vary from carrier to carrier and from the terminal where you depart. If you are with Air Canada and departing from Toronto (Pearson) or on a connecting flight where you must re-check your baggage, here is what you will likely encounter:
 - a) You will most likely go through Terminal One. Leave yourself at least 3 hours because you will be in for a long ordeal. Have your washroom break before you get in queue. In 2017 Barry Turner (A.P.) missed a connecting flight en route to Florida for the Dixie Grand; Lloyd Beecraft missed a flight to Phoenix (he was 3 hours ahead of his departure time); I missed a flight to Tampa (I was also 3 hours ahead of the departure time). Sometimes you can take another flight the same day but sometimes you won't get a flight until the next day.
TIP: Arrive earlier rather than later.

- b) Go to the “International” departure area (at Terminal One, that is area “11” and it is the furthest away).
- c) Skip the queue for the automated boarding pass machines. Reason: When you use this process you won’t get a boarding pass when you disclose you have a firearm – you will be directed to the check-in line and most often you will be in this queue for a long time.
- d) When you navigate the queue and reach a check-in attendant, tell him or her right away that you will be checking in a firearm.
TIP: Use proper terminology. Don’t say “gun” for several reasons – people within earshot, especially in Canada, get alarmed, and check-in personnel get flustered, many assume it is a “handgun”. Call it what it is – you are checking in a competition shotgun. Many check-in attendants are unfamiliar with the process. Without being condescending, be prepared to help them. They will need to procure a firearm declaration form that you will need to fill in and sign. There are two material areas you will be declaring – one, that you know it is an offence to have a loaded firearm and you are declaring your firearm is unloaded; and two, that you are not transporting ammunition or, if you are, that you comply with the regulations.
TIP: Process is simpler and faster if you travel with no ammunition.
This form is in multiple parts and different colours. One stays with the firearm (inside the gun case). One stays with you. One is attached to your receipt, etc.
TIP: Be patient. Many check-in attendants have never checked a firearm or can’t remember the rules, so they have to look up procedures online, and many call a supervisor to help ensure they have complied. This process can take a while.
- e) You must then take your gun case to the oversize cargo line. You will have to wait until your turn so have your paperwork ready. Your gun case will go up a conveyor belt and through an x-ray device.
TIP: When the gun case clears x-ray, it then goes down another conveyor belt to a lower floor level. Later, your gun case will have to be physically located and brought upstairs to the U.S. Customs Control secondary screening area.
TIP: If you have a suitcase or other checked baggage, you will be given a receipt sticker for each one and these will be attached to your back-up boarding document as well as your declaration form. But there is nothing on this receipt sticker to differentiate which is the gun case and which is the suitcase. Therefore make a note before the gun case goes onto the x-ray belt which is which in case you have to later identify which one is the gun case that someone has to go looking for.
FURTHER TIP: Often, at the U.S. Border Control area, they want to inspect all of your checked luggage, not just your gun case. I therefore take my suitcase and put it through the oversize baggage x-ray procedure just like the gun case. This keeps these two checked pieces reasonably close together and more easily found (otherwise they go down two separate conveyors and end up potentially a long ways from each other).
This time (for me) the U.S. Customs wanted to see only the gun case. Last time (for me) they wanted to see both.

4. Now you are ready to navigate the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol procedures and to start (at least at Terminal One) you have to go all the way out of check-in Area 11 to the main corridor and travel to the entrance where it says "Visitors to U.S." or words to that effect. The Nexus line likely won't shorten things for you as you have a declared firearm. So you will have to wait in queue outside the entrance, eventually show your boarding pass to a security officer and go into the security area.
5. Once you are in the security area, you will be in another winding and potentially lengthy queue. Eventually you will place items in a bin including your coat, belt, shoes, electronic devices, carry-on, etc. and you will personally go through a metal detector or x-ray device, possibly be wanded with a detector and then you can pick up your personal items.
TIP: Hold onto your pants. I have never heard of anyone charged with indecent exposure but belts do serve a purpose.
6. You then stand in queue again waiting to go through the next set of doors. You produce your boarding pass (again) and are ushered through.
7. What awaits you on the other side of the door? You guessed it – another queue. This is the line for people waiting to use one of the many automated terminals where you insert your passport, you answer questions on the screen, and you're prompted to then look at the camera so your picture can be taken. (Most people have no idea where the camera is as there are so many bells and whistles in front of you. Some people's image is captured where the person is looking up, or around – whatever. Eventually you will get a printed receipt with your picture that at best shows you are likely human but not much else.
8. Next you take your passport, boarding pass and your printed photo receipt and stand in a very long winding queue waiting to visit a live U.S. Customs Officer who will review your documents. Be sure to declare that you have a firearm. He or she will ask you where you are going with the firearm and what you will be using the firearm for. Most custom agents don't ask too many questions at this stage but be prepared to produce, if necessary, an invitation (although it is technically not supposed to be required). You will get the most hassle on this at some New York State land entry locations as NY State seems to have rules that transcend ATF requirements.
9. Now you must be escorted to the U.S. Customs & Border Control "secondary" screening and clearance. At the desk they will take your passport, boarding card and (for the first time) you will produce your ATF form. It is now a waiting game. You can't use any electronic devices. You wait, and wait. Eventually your gun case (and perhaps other checked baggage) is retrieved from downstairs. An agent will ask you for the combination (or key) and will open and inspect your firearm(s). It doesn't end there. A Canadian inspector (TSSA) is then called who will eventually show up and inspect the firearm and the case, clear it and the U.S. agent will then close the gun case, lock it and put it back on the conveyor belt destined to be put on your flight.
TIP: If you have a break-action shotgun and your serial number can be read only when the lever is depressed, you will often have to tell them how to do this. If you say nothing, the lever will remain depressed throughout your flight and thus could damage the gun. Tell them how to

restore the lever to a neutral position. They invariably lock it but watch to make sure. You will be on the other side of the counter, well removed from the gun case and shotgun so pay close attention.

10. Once you are cleared to leave this secondary screening area, you will exit into an area that will lead you to your gate and you proceed as usual.

TIP: While you are in the secondary screening area you will not hear most terminal announcements. Your gate may change. For instance, my boarding pass indicated I was departing from Gate F68. When I got there it showed departures to "Memphis". I checked on the big board and my departure gate showed F61. Apparently this had been announced but because I was tied up in Secondary, I didn't hear it. If you are jammed for time always look at the big "Departure Board" as your gate may have changed.

The good news (for me) is that this time I navigated all the procedures and queues in 2 hours and 25 minutes. A few wrong turns here and there could have been time costly and a flight could easily be missed. For many U.S. residents, returning to the U.S. by air with a firearm may result in similar procedures and delays.

There is an old saying, "Time to spare, go by air."

I hope this helps. Travelling with a firearm by air is challenging but you could be in some sports where it is even more challenging – like equestrian.

Have a great shooting season.

Paul Shaw,
Ontario Delegate

P.S. When I arrived in Phoenix it took 1 ½ hours for Air Canada to finally admit my gun case and shotgun were still in Toronto. It arrived 36 hours later, gun case damaged.