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Interesting experiences at London's Heathrow and Chicago's O'Hare

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IT takes less than two minutes to get past Immigration at London's Heathrow airport but it takes about half an hour at Chicago's O'Hare airport. Both cities boast of first class international airports, but Heathrow is tops as far as I'm concerned.

I flew into Heathrow last week enroute to Chicago where Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad received an award for Lifetime Achievement in getting Malaysia out of its economic and financial turmoil. I was in London for only two nights before catching the flight to O'Hare.

I flew into London on a Malaysia Airlines flight, made memorable by friendly and courteous service. The food quality was somewhat different this time around, but most passengers had no major complaints.

Privileged passengers at Heathrow were given a red card to pass through Immigration quickly and with a minimum of fuss. This is the fast-track lane where First and Business Class passengers are accorded special treatment, only in so far as Immigration clearance is concerned.

The cards are issued upon disembarkation. Passengers with this card need not join the long queue and instead get their passport checked and stamped very quickly. Apparently, the privilege is accorded to foreigners only because an English passport-holder given a fast-track red card was told that he had to join the queue and get pass Immigration meant for them.

Foreigners arriving after such a long flight are made to feel welcomed by such a thoughtful arrangement. I don't think our own airport has a similar arrangement but perhaps the authorities can give some thought and have it implemented, even if some modifications are needed.

It's very different at O'Hare. The in-flight service provided by American Airlines was good. Privileged passengers were given portable DVD players and about a dozen discs for their private viewing pleasure. The flight was slightly bumpy but as it turned out, there wasn't much to worry about.

O'Hare Airport has a reputation of being one of the busiest in the world and many aircraft are made to queue before they land. In the aviation industry, this is referred to as "stacking." I could see the airliners circling and taking their position to land one by one.

On disembarkation, passengers made their way to the immigration counters. It was quite a long walk, but most did not complain. After a nine-hour non-stop flight, a little bit of walking was most welcomed.

We arrived at Terminal Five. There were about 30 immigration counters at one end of the terminal and I was told there were more at other ends of the sprawling airport. Sadly, only three counters were opened.

There was no fast-track lane as in Heathrow and the queue of foreign passport holders were getting longer and longer. A man with his two granddaughters joined my queue and grumbled why there weren't more counters opened. Perhaps, we had arrived on a slow-inbound day and there was no real need to open more counters. Other passengers were also complaining quietly but generally everyone accepted the delay calmly.

It took about 40 minutes to get to the counter and have my passport stamped. Those holding American passports had no difficulties at all. In fact, they had their passports stamped faster than the foreigners. This is perhaps common at all immigration counters anywhere in the world.

But a pleasant surprise greeted me at the counter when the duty officer said he knew where Malaysia is. This was most interesting as many

Americans are unable to place where Malaysia is on the map. Probably, Petronas' twin towers have helped to make the country famous. But Chicago, I think, has not forgiven us for breaking the world's tallest building record which it held with its Sears Tower!

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