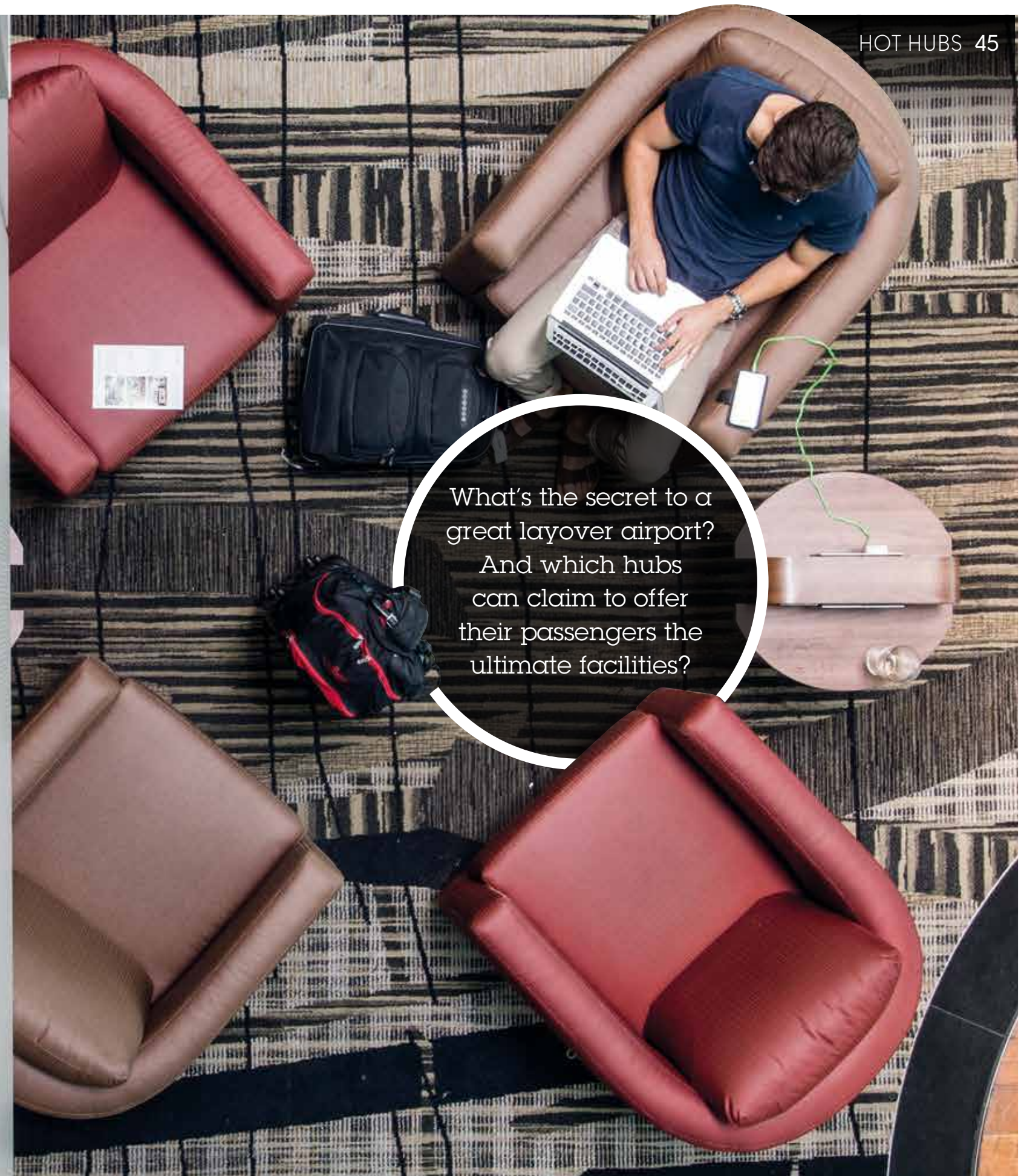




# central intelligence



What's the secret to a great layover airport? And which hubs can claim to offer their passengers the ultimate facilities?



■ To seize a higher share of the millions of ■ layover passengers that are crisscrossing the globe, the top hub airports are competing to outdo each other by offering a cornucopia of facilities. Amenities that were once the preserve of towns and cities are now found at airports, including ice rinks, IMAX cinemas and concert stages. But glittering facilities are not enough to create a great layover airport, according to aviation consultant David Huttner, from Nyras.

“Being a world-class layover airport is a three-legged stool,” he says. “You need a fantastic partner carrier, a helpful geographical location and a great product. For example, although it has a great airline partner in Jet Airways, Mumbai is far from the world’s greatest layover destination because it doesn’t offer a good enough product. But Dubai (DXB) has everything – a perfect strategic location, a fantastic airline partner in Emirates and amazing facilities.”

DXB is in many ways the archetypal layover destination. Half of its passengers are in transit, with an average stay of between three and six hours, which is much longer than average. Around 100 airlines from 240 destinations use the airport, but the bulk of passengers are served by Emirates. Dubai has to make sure the layover experience is superb, or passengers could desert for a rival Middle Eastern hub, such as Hamad International Airport (Qatar) or Abu Dhabi International.

RIGHT: Dubai boasts a dedicated hotel (inset) and a Kids Zone (main) for transit passengers



// You need a fantastic partner carrier, a helpful geographical location and a great product //



Fleet footed

Does the recent decline in demand for the A380 – as airlines focus their investments on smaller aircraft such as the Boeing 787 and Airbus 350 – threaten the rise of the hub airport? Not so, according to consultant David Huttner, who says this would be an oversimplification. Although the A380 is valuable for some hubs, he says, others can function perfectly well without it.

“The A380 has proven valuable in supporting hubs that have the critical mass to sustain its capacity, such as Dubai, which has built a dedicated A380 terminal. It’s also very useful where capacity is required in a slot-constrained airport environment such as at China’s Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport,” he says.

In a difficult market for the superjumbos, the challenge for Airbus is to ensure it has a wide enough customer base with these types of requirements. But even if A380 sales plummeted, it wouldn’t undermine the importance of hub airports, says Huttner.

“Just because an airport doesn’t have A380s, it doesn’t mean it can’t be a good hub. Many hubs do well out of fleets of 787s and 777s,” he says. “British Airways and Qantas both use the 787 to feed their hub destinations. And similar-sized aircraft are being used on routes that were simply unsustainable before, such as between Austin, Texas and London Heathrow. Austin would be highly unlikely to sustain larger wide-bodied aircraft, but it still feeds the London hub.

The 787, and similar aircraft, can open up routes that the A380 cannot.”

Huttner also points out that many smaller hubs operate successfully without any need for the A380. “Riga has developed into a great hub with its partner airline Air Baltic and it uses smaller aircraft that are appropriate for its market. Helsinki is another hub that is highly rated by regular passengers, but it won’t have any need for A380s,” he says.

Nearly all hubs, Huttner argues, benefit from a mix of gauges in aircraft to suit the market within their range. “The only caveat is that you don’t want too many aircraft types in a small fleet of, say, 20. But if I have 200 aircraft, I can afford to have three or four types of aircraft,” he says.

“Following the government’s mandate, we want to provide a magical experience for ‘customers’ – we don’t even call them passengers anymore. Everyone is working together to promote Dubai as a destination and the airport provides the first and last impression for visitors. Everything has to be good so the airport will be seen as a destination,” says Anita Mehra, senior VP of communications and reputation at Dubai Airports.

Its stunning interiors make DXB look like a gigantic luxury hotel and the facilities really are breathtaking. There are grandiose lounges, high-tech gyms, international restaurants and spas, as well as more than 50,000ft² of duty-free shopping. But rival major airports can match, or nearly match, the Dubai offering and DXB has to continually search for more unique amenities.

“We’re constantly striving to find new platforms to enchant customers,” says Mehra. “For example, our musicDXB program puts on free top musical acts on the stage in Concourse B every two weeks. We’ve had performers like *Britain’s Got Talent* stars Jack Pack, international pop artist Grace, and *X Factor Arabia* winner Hamza Hawsawi.”

Arrive early and relax

More than most airports, Dubai has to cater for exhausted passengers who might have endured a 16-hour flight from Los Angeles en route to Australia and could be preparing mentally for another 12-hour one. “We provide sleeping pods so they can catch a few hours’ rest and there’s a tranquil Zen garden which is perfect to help them unwind,” she says.

In 2015, the airport launched ‘Hangout at DXB’ during the holiday season, to encourage travelers to arrive early to beat the rush and make the most of the facilities on offer. It was part of an international campaign to change the mindset of passengers heading for the airport. Dubai Airports used radio, TV and social media to provide tips for passengers aimed at facilitating a smoother journey through the airport. The airport partnered with concessionaires to offer gift vouchers, which encouraged longer stays. For DXB the main focus behind getting passengers to arrive earlier is that it improves the flow through the terminals during peak travel season.

“Easing congestion at the gates is important as everyone becomes more comfortable and relaxed,” Mehra says. “We’ve also introduced smart gates for UAE residents. All residents have Emirates ID, the national ID cards, and these can now be used

David Huttner, senior VP, Nyras



LEFT: The world’s first Butterfly Garden at an airport is at Changi T3 and boasts a koi pond





ABOVE: Weary travelers appreciate clear and distinct signage



ABOVE: A rooftop swimming pool awaits passengers at Changi Terminal 1  
RIGHT: A transit hotel at Zurich International offers runway views



at the immigration eGates on arrival and departure across our terminals, allowing customers to clear immigration in under 15 seconds without talking to anyone. It gets the queuing down and they have more time to enjoy the amenities.”

### Sharp signage

Weary passengers may be most concerned about navigating around the airport easily and so DXB has made sure the airport signage is intuitive to understand and has a recognizable color scheme. The airport provides digital wayfinding on its website, as well as its iPhone and Android smartphone apps, and uniformed helpers with iPads are on hand to assist uncertain passengers at all touchpoints between curbside and boarding gates.

One large US hub airport, San Francisco International (SFO), is working hard to improve its signage, too. The airport aims to ensure there are clear lines of sight to both gates and amenities. “Our strategy is to create ‘safe harbors’ around signage. There has to be room for luggage, wheelchairs and space for passengers to pause as they study the signs,” says Christopher Birch, the director of guest experience at SFO. “Our focus is also on providing important visual cues, placing critical information at decision points and providing walking times for passengers so they can manage the clock.”

### Sell the home brand

Zurich Airport, another acclaimed hub in the heart of Europe, provides many of the same facilities as Dubai, including family areas with play zones for children, luxury overnight hotels, fitness centers and uniformed helpers. But layovers are likely to be much shorter, and Zurich prides itself on its minimum 45-minute timeframe.

DXB has made sure the airport signage is intuitive to understand and has a recognizable color scheme

Anita Mehra, Dubai Airports



Zurich is also keen to remind its layover passengers that they are in Switzerland, rather than just another homogenous airport space. In the airside center, for example, there is a showcase Swiss chocolate manufacturer. And the ‘train’ connecting Pier E with the airside center has a distinctly Swiss flavor. “We’ve added background noises of cow bells and chirruping birds as well as a backdrop of Swiss mountains and Heidi. Passengers find it amusing and they love it,” says Sonja Zöchling Stucki, head of corporate communications.

Another successful attempt to promote the indigenous local culture to passengers with time to spare is Seoul Incheon Airport’s Traditional Cultural Center, which has served more than 500,000 visitors free of charge since 2004. Participants can learn how to make jewelry boxes out of hanji – traditional Korean paper – or make cell phone straps using traditional Korean sewing techniques. They might try on traditional clothing, or listen to both traditional and fusion music. In Germany, Munich Airport promotes local culture at the annual Christmas market, and at the airport brewery, which features Bavarian-style beers.

Not all passengers are seduced by the multitude of things on offer, however. David Huttner says the principal desire of frequent travelers is often simply to enjoy an ‘efficient’ service. “Helsinki doesn’t have the same level of facilities as Dubai, but most layover passengers regard it as a great hub. The experience is not just about



## Five of the best

### 1. Pet paradise

Denver International Airport has set up the Paradise 4 Paws 25,000ft<sup>2</sup> pet resort, which allows day and overnight stays in large suites. Indoor play areas for dogs have soft rubber flooring and bone-shaped splashing pools. Some dog suites even have flatscreen TVs. Meanwhile, cats explore a community of bungalows, overlooking an adventure jungle. Owners can keep tabs on their pets through 24-hour webcams.

### 2. Read all about it

Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport has introduced the world's first "e-book airport library", offering rentable iPads and e-readers, each loaded with more than 400 books and thousands of magazines and newspapers in English and Chinese. The library is run by the airport duty-free shop, and was created in collaboration with Taiwan's government.

### 3. Fish to go

Fairmont Vancouver Airport has a special service for passengers who have had successful fishing trips in the great Canadian outdoors. A 'fish valet' allows passengers to store their catch in a 575ft<sup>3</sup> freezer. While the passenger goes off to enjoy cocktails, or a meal, the valet packages up the fish to protect it on the flight home.

### 4. Dress rehearsal

Hong Kong International Airport has established the 30,000ft<sup>2</sup> Dream Come True Education Park (DCT) for children. The DCT provides 21 role-play activities for kids to develop their understanding of various jobs and build teamwork. The roles include dressing up as pilots and flight attendants, astronauts, photographers, firefighters, paramedics, airport police, shop managers, teachers and chefs.

### 5. Let the music play

At Austin-Bergstrom International Airport in Texas, passengers can watch live music at the six stages of Music In The Air. Austin brands itself the 'live music capital of the world' and is home to 2,000 bands and performing artists. The airport selects the best of these local artists to perform around the airport from Monday to Friday.

© nice architecture and luxury shopping," he says. "The jaded traveler, who has seen a few too many airports, has a simple checklist. They want to get quickly to a connecting flight without hitting their Fitbit 10,000 steps per day goal. These high-yield 'road warriors' value convenience and amenities such as hot showers. Having all the saunas and foot massages is nice, but less important to them. They'd prefer a quick connection, which Helsinki tends to offer, to a long layover."

### Stress reduction

Singapore Changi Airport recognizes its passengers may have different requirements. While it offers a long list of facilities, including fish spas, five gardens, a multistory slide, Xbox gaming stations and free movies, the airport also looks after those jaded road warriors. "We believe in making the airport experience as fuss-free and comfortable as possible. For layover passengers, traveling can be extra stressful and tiring," says Hui Min Quek, manager marketing division, Changi Airport. "So, our focus is to ensure we address their functional needs sufficiently with clear signage, clean restrooms and free internet access. Only then do we seek to positively surprise them with a myriad of other services."

The story of good layover airports does not end here, however. The best hubs are always looking to pull away from the competition. At SFO, for instance, there are plans to add more amenities as its terminal renovations proceed. "We're planning an observation deck, post-security connection terminal-wide with an associated walking trail, a variety of new dining areas, art and technology corridors, and an art activity space hosted by the airport museum, which includes themed activities and relaxation zones," says Birch.

Meanwhile, DXB is building new hospitality zones that will open in the next few months, although the final details are a secret. "What I can say is they will give passengers an incredible sense of place," says Mehra. "They will know immediately they have arrived in Dubai and Arabia. Our ultimate goal is to turn transit passengers into visitors, then to convert some of them into long-term residents." ■

ABOVE: Changi T3 boasts a movie theater  
LEFT: Ambassador Transit Lounge gym facilities at Changi T2

