

CAN YOU REALLY USE APPLE WATCH BOARDING PASSES TO TRAVEL?

News / Airlines



Wearables are the big buzz in the aviation industry right now, whether it's for passengers or for crew. Yet most of the analysis on the way they affect the passenger experience so far has been from tech media, and has tended to lack an understanding of how and why airlines make the decisions they make.

So with a new **Apple Watch** on-wrist, RGN decided to give its implementation of Passbook a road-test flying from London to Hamburg via Frankfurt.

En route to the airport, the **boarding pass** popped up on the Apple Watch with a quick tap on the wrist, at the same time it appeared on the iPhone. Online checkin had previously added the boarding pass to Passbook, and the seamless integration is very pleasing.

One issue is that no terminal details are given on the watch face. That's theoretically explicable by the fact that the Watch was designed in San Francisco, except that surely Sir Jonathan Ive has flown commercially through London Heathrow and noticed the issue? This information is on the back of the boarding pass card on the phone, so it's odd that it's invisible on the Watch.

Inside the terminal, the first scan was at bag drop, where the boarding pass scanners face upwards, so the barcode must face precisely downwards. This is a human interface problem: you either have to wear the watch so loosely that you can slide it around your wrist to face downwards, or rotate your entire wrist exactly 180° so the face of the watch is precisely parallel with the scanner screen, which is difficult to gauge.

Another issue: the first section of the boarding pass to pop up is always the flight details section, and not the barcode, and an indeterminate amount of scrolling is required to reach the barcode, which is also easy to overshoot and reach the Close button. There's a fairly undocumented fix to double-tap the boarding pass to reach it, but that's less than obvious and could be emphasised.

The rotation problem popped up again at security, and again at the lounge, by which point it became clear that the trick for airport use of an Apple Watch is to loosen the band on my watch sufficiently to be able to slide it quickly around one's wrist.

(RGN also popped into a few other lounges on the same day to check them out, using the Apple Watch boarding pass for access; the only one where the rotation issue did not present was Air Canada's Maple Leaf Lounge, and there there was an even bigger problem: the top-reading scanner only had an inch of clearance from the bottom of the device, which meant that using the watch is completely impossible, since it locks once off the wrist.)

Getting onto the aircraft was simple enough — even getting used to the 180° twist at this point — as was connecting through Frankfurt and arriving in Hamburg.

With a fairly simple itinerary within Western Europe, there was one technical glitch with the Watch — it wasn't syncing with the phone Passbook before the return flight, but the problem was fixed with a watch restart.

Yet that raises questions about how practical the Watch would be for complex, multi-airline itineraries, or indeed departing from or transiting airports with different security requirements that included the "scribble on/stamp your boarding pass" level of technology.

The thing is, the Apple Watch worked fine, but it wasn't as convenient as just using the phone, because you need two hands to use the watch. With a phone, you can pull it out of your pocket and swipe for the boarding pass. With the Watch, you need to turn one wrist to wake it, scroll down from the top with the other hand, tap on Passbook, and double-tap for the QR code.

Also annoying: the rotation issue, and this is especially frustrating since it has been a problem from the first days of using smartphone boarding passes. The problem from a smartphone perspective before Passbook and similar apps was that flipping the phone 180° to use an upwards-facing scanner will usually activate the screen rotation function, which hides part of the boarding QR code from view. Now there's a related issue with wearables. Why is it that supermarkets have L-shaped scanners, yet airlines don't?

If wearables are going to take off — and they are — it would seem that it's near-field communications (NFC) that will start people actually using them to travel. It's significantly easier to pay for something with Apple Pay using a Watch than it is to move through an airport. Until NFC becomes a reality? It's easier to use an app or web checkin on your phone to get an oldschool paper boarding pass at the desk.

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