

New show goes behind the scenes at Miami airport

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MIAMI (AP) _ The Travel Channel has spent years telling stories about where people go, but now they're doing a show on how people get there.

``Airport 24/7: Miami" offers viewers a behind-the-scenes look at what it takes to move more than 100,000 travelers each day through Miami International Airport.

``We host a Super Bowl every day at MIA," security director Lauren Stover said, comparing the number of travelers to attendance at the championship football game.

With thousands of employees running what can easily be compared to a small city, the show follows workers as they deal with terrorist threats, intercept drug smugglers, attend to medical emergencies, repair aircraft and secure an Air Force One landing, all the while trying to get the passengers to their flights and the planes in the sky on time.

``This is one of many ways in which Travel Channel is trying to give viewers a different look at all aspects of travel," network general manager Andy Singer said. ``And we think the Miami International Airport is a fascinating way to do that."

The first two episodes of the show premier back-to-back at 9 p.m. Tuesday.

The idea for the show started with 2C Media owner Chris Sloan, who said he's had a passion for commercial aviation since he was a child. His longtime hobby has been collecting photos and memorabilia from airports around the world. He's even been maintaining a website about airports and airlines _ airarchive.com _ for nearly a decade.

“I travel a lot,” Sloan said. “And I felt that this was a world that was much maligned.”

Sloan said it was challenging to convince airport officials he wasn't trying to do some kind of expose or smear job. And once MIA agreed to the show, they still had to convince multiple airlines and government agencies to give them access, Sloan said. But their patience and perseverance appeared to pay off.

“Whenever you go to an airport, there are always signs that say, ‘Staff Only,’ ‘Do Not Enter,’ ‘Prohibited Area,’ ‘Alarm Will Go Off,’” Sloan said. “But we actually go to all those places, and that's unique.”

Ken Pyatt, MIA's deputy director of operations, said he was surprised by how dramatic the show turned out to be. He said he thought the show would be more matter-of-fact in its presentation of different areas of the airport. Instead, camera crews spent several months earlier this year following employees around, showing rather than telling the types of challenges workers face on a regular basis.

“I think the editing of the show is amazing,” Pyatt said. “How they were able to put these little vignettes together each show and actually tell four or five stories.”

Pyatt said he particularly enjoyed a later episode that deals with Air Force One landing in Miami the same day that the budget airline Interjet is scheduled to hold an event celebrating its inaugural flight between Miami and Mexico City. The Interjet event, with celebrities and local officials set to attend, had been scheduled at least month in advance, Pyatt said. But when the president comes to town, everything else becomes secondary to that.

“The best laid plans have to often be abandoned or shrunk by something that has more precedence, and we deal in that operational mode 24/7,” Pyatt said. “You can only prepare so much for what goes on, but to give the public a seamless experience, it really requires people to go above and beyond.”

Improving that seamless experience for travelers has been major priority at MIA over the past few years. The airport had developed a reputation for bad customer service, and a major push was made to turn that around. Part of that push was bringing trainers from the Disney Institute to Miami to teach around 400 front-line staff, including executives, the Disney way of doing things.

“That was the beginning of a lot of energy and change,” said Dickie Davis, who oversees customer service at MIA.

Between the Disney training and other changes, Davis said she's proud of the progress she's seen at the airport. And while not directly related, Davis acknowledged that improvements at MIA likely helped the show's producers gain access to the airport.

“It's easier to let people come into your house when you've just redecorated,” Davis said. “And we've never looked better.”

If there's one thing that's still more important than customer service at MIA, it would be security. With about 40 million passengers moving through the airport every year, Stover — MIA's security director — said Miami is a “Category X” airport, meaning it's a prime target for a terrorist attack.

Airport security is far more than the baggage screeners and officers that passengers see, Stover said. The key to effective security is having multiple layers so that if someone gets by one layer, they'll be caught by the next, she said.

Six years ago, MIA began making its 40,000 civilian employees part of the security program. Starting with a group of about 70 janitors, MIA has given its civilian employees behavioral recognition training, which helps identify suspicious behavior. Since then, civilian employees have made about 3,000 reports, dozens of which have been turned over to the FBI and immigration officials.

``If you're going to get an airport ID, then I expect you to have your eyes all around and be vigilant in what you're doing," Stover said.

Working with a film crew was challenging, Stover said, because security workers still had to do their jobs and couldn't necessarily wait for the cameras.

``They had to get it," Stover said. ``Because if they didn't capture it, I certainly wasn't going to tell the knucklehead that came to the checkpoint with a loaded firearm to turn around, walk out and come back in again so we could film them. So they had to get it right the first time."

Despite any temporary inconvenience, Stover said she hopes the show will let travelers know how much work goes into getting them safely to wear they need to go.

``Miami has had its fair share of criticism," Stover said, ``and we felt it was important to show the real side of MIA."