

SAS Joins European Airline Mobile Boarding Pass Bandwagon

APRIL 16, 2009 -- SAS Scandinavian Airlines this week launched a two-and-a-half month trial period for the use of mobile barcode boarding passes on travel between seven cities, including Copenhagen, Helsinki, London Heathrow and Stockholm.

SAS is the latest European airline to adopt some level of mobile boarding passes through the use of 2D barcodes on travelers' mobile phones and personal digital assistants. Other European airlines began similar trials last year and in the first few months of 2009 have seen broader rollouts.

Last month, Air France-KLM extended their mobile boarding capabilities to most flights from Paris Charles de Gaulle International Airport and Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, their home airports, to most European destinations except for the United Kingdom. The expansion of the program comes after a trial period that began in September 2008 for flights between Paris and Amsterdam.

Lufthansa has one of the widest mobile boarding pass capabilities as travelers on most flights originating in Germany or in 20 other European cities, including Amsterdam, London Heathrow, Paris and Vienna, can use the service. The carrier offers the service via Web-enabled mobile devices and short message service only for its status customers.

Like SAS, other smaller European carriers have adopted the technology in the past several months. Finnair released its limited mobile boarding pass service earlier this year. BMI now enables barcode mobile boarding passes on U.K.-domestic flights and from London Heathrow to Dublin.

British Airways has mobile checkin applications, which it launched globally in October, but it has yet to implement mobile boarding passes.

The barcode boarding passes, which are delivered either by short message service, multimedia messaging service or e-mail to handheld devices also can be used to pass through security, gain access to airline lounges and register baggage depending on airport and airline technology infrastructures.

"Currently, approximately 10 percent of SAS passengers check in via SMS, but our goal for 2011 is that 80 percent of our customers check in off-airport, which means online or via their mobile," SAS senior vice president of commercial Lars Sandahl Sørensen said in a statement. "It is very important for us that our customers have the smoothest and simplest travel experience possible with us. We are therefore looking forward to rolling out the service later this year, once we have evaluated the trial."

The SAS barcode boarding pass trial is based on technology from U.K.-based Mobiqa, which in March became the International Air Transport Association's strategic preferred supplier for mobile boarding solutions. According to Mobiqa, it owns the European patent for the process of using barcodes for delivery and display on mobile devices, which includes sizing barcodes appropriately for various mobile devices. Northwest Airlines and Qatar Airways were first adopters of Mobiqa's airline technology. Mobiqa's mobile technology is compatible with existing airport e-ticket barcode scanning equipment. The technology is available in more than 40 countries.

Mobile boarding pass adoption is more difficult in Europe where barcodes are required, as opposed to other regions where text-based boarding passes are accepted, according to Michael Lacy, CEO of U.K.-based mobile travel technology company The Handy Group. This has led to infrastructural roadblocks in Europe as many airports and security providers have yet to acquire the proper technology to read the mobile barcodes.

"For the airlines themselves, it's a relatively straightforward thing for them to do," said Lacy. "They all now have online checkin, so the transfer of that to mobile isn't a massive step. What is a massive step is getting the airports and security services to read that information that is sent on the phone."

What has helped move forward barcode boarding pass initiatives is mobile device adaptation to handle 2D barcode configuration, which is similar to barcodes found on consumer packaged goods. 3D barcodes previously were the standard for mobile devices, according to Lacy.

"For quite a while, it was very difficult to read a 2D barcode on a phone, mainly because of screen size and the resolution," he said. "Because those handsets now are much better, there is no absolute requirement for a 3D barcode. For added security, you need a 3D barcode. There is not a massive difference. It's just that 3D code was built specifically for mobiles."

According to an IATA spokesperson, there is no mandate to implement mobile barcode boarding passes. IATA has a 2010 deadline for airlines to use 2D barcodes for printed boarding passes.