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The upper deck of a garage at Dulles International Airport attracts plane spotters. Above, Rafal Szczypek, left, Blendi Qatipi, Sunil Gupta and Michal Kuklinski watch planes taxi off the runway. At right, Gupta and Qatipi check out a jet from All Nippon Airways.



High-Tech Bird Watching

Plane Spotters Run Into Trouble After Sept. 11

By Paul Glader Washington Post Staff Writer

Sunil Gupta and his buddies were on top of a parking garage at Dulles International Airport one recent Saturday morning, practicing one of the more dubious hobbies of the new terrorist-wary age: plane spotting.

Chatting in the sunshine, while checking flight schedules on laptops and listening to hand-held scanners tuned to air traffic control signals, the carefree guys, all computer specialists, looked as if they were throwing a Dilbert-theme tailgate party.

Someone heard a far-off engine and spotted a streak in the breezy sky. Banter ceased. The smokers dropped their cigarettes and grabbed cameras, binoculars and notepads for the approach of an airliner they thought would be a special-edition jet from Ethiopia.

"That's not Ethiopian," said one man, gazing skyward and totally engrossed. "I think it's a JetBlue."

"No, it's a Delta," said another, hoisting binoculars into position. But as it neared,

they recognized it as the Ethiopian Airlines plane they were waiting for. Its red, green and yellow tail colors were a dead giveaway.

With heightened security since Sept. 11 at airports worldwide, this nerdy, yet innocent hobby has had its setbacks, and spotters have found themselves in a tense relationship with security officers.

Police at an airport in Bangkok, for example, detained Gupta last October while he was plane spotting on a business trip. He said they confiscated his film and asked whether he knew Osama bin Laden.

Gupta, a Gaithersburg resident, said he was released after he explained his peculiar hobby. The next day, he was featured in Bangkok's media because of the security scare.

The hobbyists rattle off airplane trivia, scribble down registration numbers found on the tail of aircraft, take photos that they collect and trade, examine their plane data on spreadsheets and generally enjoy déja' vu when a jet they saw years ago arrives.

"It is pretty much a phenomenon

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Sept. 11 Complicates Plane Spotting

SPOTTERS, From C1

around the country where people position themselves and watch the planes land," said Arlene Salac, a spokeswoman for the Federal Aviation Administration's eastern region.

Except these are not leisurely enthusiasts. Dozens of hard-core spotters spend as much as 20 hours a week at Dulles, Reagan National and Baltimore-Washington International airports and take vacations to other cities for whole weekends spent watching aircraft. They pore through aviation guidebooks, get excited about interesting color schemes on planes and share sightings on group e-mail lists.

The FAA say plane spotting and photography are legal, but boundary enforcement is up to local airports. Spotters say some police officers at Dulles are rude and condescending toward them and their hobby, even when they pursue it lawfully.

"Anywhere that is public is open to plane spotting," said Marty Clarke, a duty operations chief at Dulles. "If there is something we don't particularly like, we will investigate."

Area spotters said they are approached by airport police regularly and often ordered to leave.

"Sometimes, I think they overstep their bounds," Gupta said.

Tara Hamilton, spokeswoman for the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, which operates Dulles and National, said spotters should expect to be questioned.

"Our police have to use their best judgment," she said.

In April, a group of 14 plane spotters from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands were arrested

at an air show in Greece and convicted of spying. British officials intervened, and the men were eventually freed.

Two local spotters said an officer at Dulles threatened to arrest them a week ago Sunday on a hill near the airport and told them they needed a permit to be there. Hamilton said no permit is needed.

At Dulles, Hamilton said, locations such as fence lines and an observation deck once open to spotters are now off-limits. She suggested that spotters use parking lots or public parks such as Gravelly Point near National but not approach fence lines.

"Walking around airport property might arouse concerns, and I hope they understand that," she said. "In this day and age, that could lead to some suspicion on the part of any law enforcement official."

Spotters said BWI and National are much more spotter-friendly than Dulles, mostly because of their designs, which feature designated areas where people can watch planes. Officers at BWI will question spotters near fence lines, and a spokesman said they want people to use a picnic area and bike trails near the airport.

"We certainly try to humanize the airport to the people who have to live with the daily operations," said John White, a BWI spokesman. "We see it as positive thing for the community."

Spotters said that they understand the need for tighter security and that they cannot visit spots they used to, but the attitude of some airport security officers frustrates them.

"They tolerate us," Gupta said.
"But there is always the cop who
just doesn't understand and

doesn't want to understand."

Hamilton said the spotters might consider staying away from Dulles and focusing their hobby at National. Spotters said they can find certain planes only at Dulles and some like a challenge.

Plane spotting has been around since aviation began, but it really developed after World War II, when civilians recorded enemy plane movements. Spotters now practice their hobby and network with thousands of others around the world. And some say enthusiasts are multiplying, as evidenced by heavy traffic on Internet sites such as www.airliners.net.

There are at least 100 Web sites and Internet use-net groups devoted to plane spotting and nearly 60 members of an online spotting group devoted to the Washington area. Gupta is webmaster of the WashBaltSpotters group on Yahoo, which contains discussions about spotting and excited field reports with numbers and names of aircraft.

"It's like anybody who collects something," said Blendi Qatipi of the District. "It eventually collects you. It's like it gets into your inner child or something."

Some men bring their children along to spot planes. Some have tried, with little success, to bring their wives or girlfriends. Most spotters are men.

Many spotters are involved in technical careers such as computers or engineering. They appreciate the patterns, numbers and precision required in aviation.

"Technologically, the airplane sort of symbolizes what is achieved right now. With computers, metals and physics, airplanes represent what the world has achieved in everything," Qatipi said. "Watching a landing is somehow majestic."