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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
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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 *déjà vu* when a jet they saw years ago arrives.

"It is pretty much a phenomenon

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