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By STEVE GARBARINO

IN THE 1960S AND early '70s, every commercial-airline pilot, it seemed, came in the mold of Dean Martin, and the stewardesses were as fetching as Angie Dickinson. When exiting a plane, children could look forward to being given snazzy Junior Flight Crew pendants. Terminal cocktail bars made perfect spots for hush-hush rendezvous with their low lighting and Virginia Slims smoke filtering through the air. Security wasn't the groan-inducing ritual we have come to expect and getting out was no hassle. You knew your ride would be waiting curbside—not shooed off, ticketed, towed or detained.



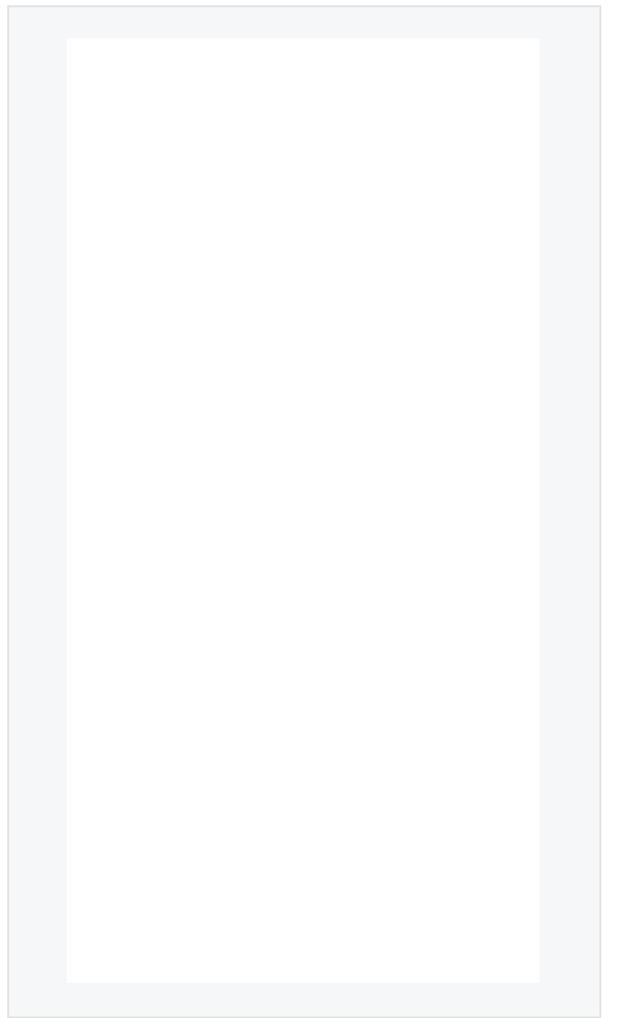
At the country's more intimate-size airports, you'll find the personal attention and sophistication that we associate with the dress-your-best days of commercial flying. Steve Garbarino has details on Lunch Break. Photo: Jeff Goldberg/Esto

Drenched in nostalgia as it may seem, the jet-set era is not completely shuttered away in the past. Many of the country's "reliever" airports—the regional and county ones that are secondary to their big-city counterparts—offer the personal attention and style that went hand in hand with the dress-your-best, special-event days of commercial flying.

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“Smaller airports can provide a less stressful and, dare we say it, pleasurable trip.”

"Compared with the major airports, going to a regional airport is more like getting picked up by a school bus at the end of your street than going to the Port Authority," said Tripp Swanhaus, a Manhattan-based reality-TV producer who frequently eschews larger airways for secondary-city regionals. He rents cars to go the rest of the distance. "The bartenders in small airport lounges are more old



school," he said. "They often remember what you drank on your last trip."

There are shortcomings: more driving time and, because there are fewer departures and arrivals, forget about catching the "next flight out" if there's inclement weather.

But if you've had your fill of security checks, Space Mountain-size ticketing lines and the general cattle-call atmosphere of major airports, smaller air-transit hubs are packed with sweet surprises and can make for a less stressful and, dare we say it, far more pleasurable trip.

Key West International Airport

(160 miles south of Miami)



Enlarge Image

Key West International Airport

Key West International Airport

You can't help smiling when you see the "Greetings from the Conch Republic" sign towering over the 1957 terminal. The retro-cool Aeromarine Airlines was the first to fly out of this port, which now includes a second terminal that was completed in 2009. Modernizing, however, hasn't diminished its throwback charm. "We have the best smoking area in the country," said Keith Kneeland, a

bartender at the terminal's Conch Flyer Restaurant & Lounge. An outdoor oasis housed in the original structure features a waterfall, sand pit and umbrella-covered tables for sampling conch chowder and imbibing a margarita or two. There's also a "five-minute special" (a draft beer and a bag of chips). "We'll give you a souvenir go-cup for your drink if you're taking off," said Mr. Kneeland. The airport serves Delta, [US Airways](#), [LCC -3.46%](#), American Eagle, United and Southwest—the last of which is planning to provide direct flights to New Orleans for those who want to keep the party going.

Westchester County Airport

(40 miles north of New York City)

Film crews know the no-fuss rewards of this glass-heavy three-level terminal: It's been used as a stand-in for Chicago's O'Hare in "Meet the Parents" and for New York's JFK in the remake of "The Thomas Crowne Affair." Now with a 1995-constructed terminal, [JetBlue](#) [JBLU -3.05%](#) is the main provider, with a handful of other airlines traveling to 15 destinations including Chicago and West Palm Beach. Some folks may miss the original tin-roofed affair, but the

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Jeff Goldberg/Esto

Westchester County Airport

structure still has an industrial chic. Regulars say the route to and from New York is less traffic-riddled than the roads leading to JFK or Lagaudia, and the county-owned terminal follows strict noise-level rules. For bidding au revoir, there's a nifty outdoor observation deck on the third floor, as well as a glass-enclosed second-floor bar and dining room, Skytop, which features swordfish and Maine steamers. Travelers are advised to carry on bags: There's only one carousel.

Palm Springs International Airport

(110 miles east of Los Angeles)



Enlarge Image

Palm Springs International Airport

Palm Springs International Airport

Designed by the modern architect Donald Wexler, this structure appears from an aerial view to be a "Jetsons"-era spaceship that landed amid the desert mountains. A commercial transportation center since 1964, it was named last year by smartertravel.com one of the most "stress-free" airports in the country. That may be due to its airy, glass-aplenty center surrounded by palm-filled outdoor enclaves with

garden seating, a smoothie stand and a seasonal wine bar. Celebrity Bistro's "Wall of Stars" features head shots of luminaries who frequented the area, including Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope and Marilyn Monroe. Besides relative newcomer Virgin America, the airport serves most of the major carriers. Where else are you going to stroll a concourse named after Sonny Bono, the dearly departed Palm Springs mayor?

Nantucket Memorial Airport

(286 miles northeast of New York City; 120 miles southeast of Boston)

The second busiest airport in Massachusetts (after Boston's Logan), Nantucket Memorial is still in its original 1950s facility. In 2009, the bungalow-facade structure went through an

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Jim Powers/Inquirer and Mirror

Nantucket Memorial Airport

expansion, mostly to separate air-taxi passengers (who don't have to be security-screened) from airline fliers (who are checked). It hasn't taken away from the local color at Crosswinds Restaurant, which serves chowder as well as fish and chips. Order a Nor'Easter (vodka, Medori Melon and lemon) and play "Name That Kennedy."

Long Beach Airport

(25 miles south of Los Angeles)



Enlarge Image

Thomas McConville

Long Beach Airport

Flying in and out of this low-slung terminal—constructed in 1941, rendered in the Streamline Moderne style and principally known as Jet Blue's West Coast hub—always seems a breeze. Now with a \$40 million concourse renovation, slated to be revealed Dec. 12, some travelers may want to stick around a while. The new configuration features multiple fire pits, al fresco wine bars, beach cabanas and palm courts. "We tried to bring back that 'Catch Me If You Can' vibe of the old days of Pan Am," said airport director Mario Rodriguez.

Other Ace Alternatives



Enlarge Image

Alternative airports include Palm Beach International Airport and Melbourne International Airport.

- **Palm Beach International Airport** (50 miles north of Fort Lauderdale) Has 12 food shops and a putting green.
- **T.F. Green Airport, Warwick, R.I.** (60 miles south of Boston) Features an oyster bar.
- **Melbourne International Airport** (in Melbourne, Fla., 70 miles southeast of Orlando) The minimalist hub has an airport museum.
- **Jacksonville International Airport** (140 miles south of Savannah, Ga.) Has a pet-boarding business and a game room.

Write to Steve Garbarino at steve.garbarino@wsj.com

Corrections & Amplifications

T.F. Green Airport, in Warwick, R.I., is about 60 miles south of Boston. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said the airport was 80 miles from Boston.

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