

Headache of parking less intense at BWI garage

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AS ANY AIR traveler knows, the modern American airport is one of the most stressful places on Earth these days.

The hassles are neverending: long lines at security checkpoints, canceled and delayed flights, \$6 muffins served by cranky 20-somethings stunned to find themselves working at a dingy kiosk in Concourse C instead of attending law school on daddy's dime. And if all this weren't enough, there's the 21st-century pre-boarding ritual of trying to spot the nutcase you and the other passengers will have to wrestle to the floor after he rushes the cockpit in mid-flight.

But into this dreary picture comes a small ray of sunshine - at least at Baltimore-Washington International: The parking's getting easier.

This is because, with very little fanfare, BWI was the first U.S. airport to introduce SmartPark, a system that features electronic signs that guide you to empty spaces in the daily and hourly parking garages.

At the entrance to the daily garage, there are also signs that indicate how many empty spaces are available on each level, so you don't have to guess which level to try first. Anyway, even though this technology has been available in Europe for years, BWI is finally coming out of the parking Dark Ages, and travelers there are celebrating. "Customer response has been overwhelming," said Bill Lins, who manages BWI's division of airport technology. "We've been very pleased."

So far, said Lins, SmartPark is only available on Level 2 of the hourly garage, although it should be available on all levels by the end of the summer.

But I tested Level 2 recently, and it's heaven compared to the old system, where you would ride around for days and days looking for an empty space, until you eventually keeled over from exhaustion and carbon monoxide poisoning and they buried you right there in the cold, hard concrete.

In fact, I ranked BWI right up there with Towson Town Center for having the two most horrible parking garages in North America, level after level of dank, exhaust-choked hell, with seemingly no beginning and no end.

If I had a flight at 11 in the morning, I would leave for the airport at, oh, dawn, just to look for a parking space.

My stress levels were through the roof. And none of it was flight-related. I didn't worry about my plane being hijacked.

I didn't worry about an engine falling off and landing in some cornfield in Kansas.

All I worried about was finding a parking space at the airport.

How sick was that?

I should have gone for counseling.

But SmartPark should eliminate a lot of that stress for travelers, allowing them to leave later for the airport. (And just knowing you don't have to breakfast on a \$6 muffin in Concourse C should raise endorphin levels, shouldn't it?)

Now, you may not care exactly how SmartPark works, but I'm going to tell you anyway, since I still have space to fill.

As Lins explained it, a sensor over each parking space sends out intermittent sound waves that bounce off the space and indicate whether it's occupied or not.

This information is then sent back to a computer, which processes it and operates the signs that direct travelers to the empty spaces.

Of course, on the day I tested SmartPark in the hourly garage, there were literally hundreds of empty parking spaces on Level 2.

One aisle I drove down had 48 empty spaces, according to a sign. Another aisle had 42 empty spaces. You could have set up a flea market in either one.

For a moment, I wondered if we were dealing with another hassle of modern air travel: the lunatic who runs past a security checkpoint to catch his flight, triggering a shutdown of the entire airport.

But John White, a spokesman for BWI, said there were so many empty spaces only because it was a Tuesday, which is typically the slowest day at the airport.

On a Sunday, the parking lot apparently looks like Disney World in July, although SmartPark should ease those edgy - but entertaining - situations when two cars arrive at a parking space at the same time.

Anyway, it's a whole new world of parking at BWI and I, for one, am thrilled.

Although a part of me will miss the old days, too: screeching up and down the aisles looking for a space, zooming from level to level and frantically checking my watch as the time of my flight approaches, finally arriving at the gate, heart pounding, just as they're closing the doors to the jetway.

Memories like that last a lifetime.