

Stansted Airport – 29th January 2009.

Stansted Mountfichet airport, to give it its full and proper name was originally a WWII bomber base serving both the RAF and USAF bomber command.

At the end of the war, the base reverted to the Air Ministry and in 1954 the runway was extended by the US Military in anticipation of use by their huge B52 strategic bombers carrying nuclear weapons as part of NATO. The Americans never reappeared but the extended runway made Stansted an ideal site for a third airport for London, taking some of the strain from both Heathrow and Gatwick. In 1991 the present terminal building, designed by Sir Norman Foster Associates, was opened, allowing passenger movements numbering some 25million persons per year.

Due to its relative remoteness, Stansted is the designated airport for hijacked planes requesting landing in the UK and has played 'host' to a number of incidents, the most recent being in 2000 when an Ariana Airlines plane from Afghanistan was hijacked and flown to Stansted. The incident ended peacefully after 4 days, during which the rest of the airport was able to operate normally.

Our visit started with some of the party arriving via the Stansted Express Shuttle from Liverpool St. Station. It was reported to be cold and uncomfortable, however the journey is quick and with additional stops at Tottenham Hale, where it connects with the Victoria Line tube and other local stations, whisks one to the airport in about 45 minutes.

Having checked in and received visitor badges we were driven by mini coach to the Fire Training Area to meet the firemen who work at the airport and to watch a demonstration of their skills. Training is a continuous requirement and each day, the 'watch' on-duty attend a number of training scenarios within the airport. Part of their training area is a multi-million pound, purpose-built plane, which has computer controlled fire rigs and which is used to simulate a number of situations from engine fires to internal fires in the cabin or cargo areas. The attending officers are called from their station on the far side of the airport via the control tower as they would be in a genuine callout. They approach the training area without knowing exactly what they are going to be faced with and have to react to the changes or situations created by the computer operator as they would in a real fire or emergency.

With the fire engines on their way from their station, we trooped out onto the tarmac to watch the demonstration. For our purposes the scenario was a plane with engine and fuel fires on the tarmac. It was noted that the aircraft in question had rather conveniently come to rest in the training area and so we were spared the walk out onto the wings or paddling in the icy waters of the Hudson River that seems to be the hallmark of current airport emergencies.

Two large and futuristic looking tenders arrived together with a more contemporary fire engine and in a very short space of time had the fires out. The exact amount of time is controlled by the computer and depends on the amount of water or foam that is pumped onto the flames. This gives an as accurate as possible training experience.

Once the fires were out we were able to get a closer look at the vehicles and the interior of the aircraft where it is possible to train for any number of fire or smoke-filled situations in the cabin.



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Getting back into our coach we retraced our route back to the airport terminal to visit the cargo areas. Stansted is an important airport for cargo and we were lucky enough to be able to visit one of the main carriers who deal with the cargo from passenger and purpose built planes and distribute it around the country. While we were at the warehouse we saw some of the many boxes of flowers that arrive each day from Kenya as well as fruit and other foodstuffs. Apparently there has not been a reported instance of exotic spiders climbing out of the bananas, yet! It did bring home however, the meaning of air miles. We also saw some of the many bags of Royal Mail, bound in this instance for Athens. Moving on, we next saw the cargo handling area where the contents of an aircraft cargo hold can be stacked three or four bays high awaiting onward processing and the pallets that are used for moving vehicles, including the Formula One racing cars when they travel away from Europe. They are stacked two high, a presumably stressful task for the fork-lift operators who would not wish to drop such a valuable cargo.

Leaving the cargo area, we were driven to the onsite Radisson SAS Stansted Hotel for lunch and a tour of the rooms and facilities that would be available for filming. The hotel consists of 500 bedrooms including 20 suites. There are three design styles: Chilli, Ocean and Urban providing a choice of room styles and spaces. All the rooms are triple glazed so there is no problem with aircraft noise, even for those rooms which look out onto the airport. The bedrooms are accessed from walkways that look down into the central atrium and dining area and which gives the hotel an airy and relaxed feel. The centre of the atrium is dominated by a 13m high 'wine tower' one of only two in the world (the other is in Las Vegas). The glass tower stores 4000 bottles of wine and is kept at a constant 13°C with the white wine chilled still further to ensure that the wine is delivered at optimum temperatures. The bottles are collected from the tower and delivered by two aerial acrobats who perform an aerial dance as they move up and down the tower on wires.

Around the outside of the central atrium are four further restaurants serving a wide range of different foods from Italian cuisine to an American style grill bar. In the basement is a small health club and gym with a swimming pool. The rooms are spacious and well laid out and there is plenty of scope for filming in the hotel rooms with views onto the airport and runway.

Following an excellent buffet lunch, courtesy of the Radisson Hotel, we walked back to the terminal area, via the covered walkway from the reception area. Here we had to pass through security, having our passes and passports scrutinised and our bags, shoes, belts and contents of our pockets checked by X-Ray.

There is only the one security point that serves all the staff passing through to airside within the airport and it is worth bearing in mind that quite a considerable amount of time can be spent moving thorough this area. This is often problematic to film crews and so anything that can be done to speed this process up is beneficial to the production. One way is to limit the number of personnel who go through to airside and to ensure that the equipment is ready for inspection in advance. It is now possible to send through film without having the cans pass through the x-ray machines by arranging for them to be swabbed of explosive materials. This needs to be arranged in advance and is subject to the agreement of the security officials on the day. There is also a cost implication in the number of personnel who go airside. The airport has a strict policy of chaperones who work with the crew. The ratio is 1 chaperone to 6 persons but 1 to 4, airside. With a large crew this can quickly get extremely expensive!

