

Attacks still felt here on Island

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Number of American visitors to B.C. 10 years ago: 6.9 million.

Number last year: 4.4 million.

Thank you, Osama bin Laden. Or George Bush, or whoever else you want to blame for the thickening of the border in the fearful fallout from 9/11.

Those boundary-crossing hassles are the most obvious way in which the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, have rippled to Vancouver Island's shores.

The question now, after a decade of passport logjams, \$26 air-security surcharges, sniffer dogs, twohour check-ins, no-fly lists, footwear gropings, shampoo bans, full-body scans, cavity searches and all the other indignities now associated with international travel, is whether we are one bit safer today than we were before the planes crashed into the twin towers. And is the cure worse than a cold we were never likely to catch?

The American visitor numbers, compiled by tourism analyst Frank Bourree of Victoria's Chemistry Consulting, are grim news. "Eighty per cent of the international visitation to Canada comes from the U.S. It's a big deal," Bourree says.

Post-9/11 security measures aren't the only factor in the loss of tourists, of course. The exchange rate (the dollar was worth 64 cents US in 2001) and the meltdown of 2008 can't be ignored. But the tourists stopped coming well before our Great Northern Peso gained strength and the U.S. economy lost its water.

It's not just tourism that has suffered, either. Other business with our biggest trading partner is constipated, too. The auto industry, dependent on components from both sides of the border, has seen red tape add \$700 or more to the price of a North American-made car. This isn't just a matter of personal inconvenience; people are losing their jobs.

The issue will be top of the agenda when Stephen Harper and Barack Obama meet this fall. Canada and the U.S. are in talks that could see us merge no-fly lists and have a shared entry-exit system that would record when a traveller crosses the border.

The talks are said to be proceeding relatively free of the hysteria that hampered decision-making after 9/11, when no measure taken in the name of security could be questioned without evoking a wide-eyed screed about the need for vigilance/paranoia. One example was they way new border-crossing document rules, part of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act, were rushed through Congress in 2004 with little thought given to their implementation or effect on the economy.

Passport offices on both sides of the border were overwhelmed, the number of applications in Canada rocketing from two million in 2000-01 to 4.7 million in 2007-08. In Victoria, long lines of rain-drenched applicants snaked down Fort Street like a Soviet Union bread-shortage scene from the 1980s. The smart ones hired the homeless to hold their place in the queue. The crunch eased after a new passport office opened in the Bay Centre in May 2009 and capacity was added nationwide.

But by then travellers, particularly American ones, were so confused about what documents they needed to get back into the U.S. that many decided to just stay home. Five years of on-again, off-again deadlines finally came to an end in June 2009, when the last phase of the new rules finally kicked in.

Today, travellers who prior to 9/11 would slip over to the U.S. with nothing more than a driver's licence or birth certificate must now carry a passport, enhanced driver's licence, the Nexus card used by frequent travellers or the FAST card used by truckers. Children under 15 need only show proof of citizenship, usually a photocopy of a birth certificate. Ditto for those under 18 who are travelling with a school or other organized group.

Those \$87 passports (\$37 or less for those under 16) weren't the only change, particularly for those travelling by plane. On April 1, 2002, the federal government began charging air travellers a security fee that now ranges from \$7.12 for a one-way domestic flight to \$25.91 for an international return ticket.

Passengers also pay in time, must now stagger bleary-eyed to the airport a couple of hours before their international flights. Once there, they might have their shoes groped (thanks to Richard Reid, the Shoe Bomber who tried to blow up a Paris-Miami flight in December 2001) or have their Starbucks seized (thanks to the Brits who tried to use liquids containers to blow up flights in 2006). They also face examination by full-body scanners or being patted down in a way that should be followed by a cigarette and a marriage proposal.

Victoria's Marianne Scott says the frisking she and her steel knee endure in American airports is intrusive enough that she doesn't like to fly to the U.S. anymore. Cross-border boating, on the other hand, has in some ways become easier since 9/11, at least for those with a Nexus card, says Scott, who writes on marine issues. That's a one-way street, though. "It's easier to go into the U.S. than to get back into Canada."

Scott rolls her eyes at the over-the-top scrutiny of low-risk travellers, particularly when contrasted against the way the U.S. shrugs at the 30,000 gun deaths it suffers in a given year. "To me, this is so incongruous that I can hardly live with it."

And really, are we being made safer, or just subjected to bureaucratic flailing? How much of a threat is there, anyway?

To answer, the authorities need only point to Canada's only real experience with cross-border terrorism, which happened right here on Vancouver Island on Dec. 14, 1999.

That's the day al-Qaeda terrorist Ahmed Ressam boarded the Coho ferry in Victoria, got as far as the terminal in Port Angeles before being caught.

It was a sweet-natured, middle-aged U.S. customs inspector named Diana Dean who became suspicious of a fidgety Ressam who, when asked to show more ID, pulled a Costco card. A search of the spare-tire well of his rented Chrysler revealed the bombmaking ingredients with which he planned to blow up Los Angeles International airport on New Year's Eve, Y2K, the dawn of the new millennium. Ressam bolted, but got tackled a few blocks away after trying to force his way into a car stopped at a light.

The thing is, Ressam had a valid Canadian passport. It's not as though the documents are some sort of magic shield against terrorism.

The U.S. border patrol has boosted its Canadian-border presence greatly since 9/11, employing some mind-boggling technology. One story stands out: A border patrol agent, stationed with a radioactivitysniffing device on the highway near Bellingham, chased down a car that sped past at more than 110 km/h. It turned out the car was carrying not a nuclear bomb, but a cat that had just received radiological treatment. Pause to consider that: They can now detect a radioactive cat doing 110 clicks.

It's not really a surprise the U.S. should pay attention to the island-dotted sieve that passes for a border between Vancouver Island and Washington state, either. The San Juans and Juan de Fuca Strait have been a smuggler's dream ever since Prohibition. In 2006, U.S. agents lying in wait at an isolated boat ramp west of Port Angeles ambushed a 24-foot speedboat packed with millions of dollars worth of ecstasy pills spirited from Vancouver. Legislation is in the works that will see the resurrection of Operation Shiprider, in which the RCMP and U.S. Coast Guard put personnel on each others' boats and conduct cross-border patrols; Vancouver Island last saw Shiprider during the 2010 Olympics.

But the security measures haven't all been popular. In 2008, the U.S. border patrol began checking the ID of passengers on domestic ferries in the San Juan Islands. Didn't uncover any terrorists, but nabbed scores of illegal aliens, mostly Mexican farmworkers, and drew plenty of grumbling from Americans who, being less sheeplike than Canadians, didn't appreciate being roused by Big Brother, particularly when roadblocks delayed their everyday business.

This summer, border patrol agent Christian Sanchez created a fuss when he told an open-government advocacy group in Washington, D.C., that his Port Angeles office was a "black hole." The 40-plus agents - that's a tenfold increase since 2006 - in the North Olympic Peninsula field office have "no mission, no purpose."

Meanwhile, the border patrol is building a new \$5.7-million headquarters on the outskirts of Port Angeles. The site was picketed by protesters Aug. 15. Ten years after 9/11, Americans are growing hinky not only about restrictions on individual freedoms but Homeland Security spending that has hit \$57 billion a year - an amount equal to one-fifth of the entire Canadian federal budget. (The Ottawa Citizen reported last week that Canada now spends twice as much on national security as it would have had budgets remained in line with pre-9/11 spending.)

Again the question: Is it worth it? Compare our airport security arrangements to the approach in Israel, where they consider high-tech gadgets and the groping of grandmothers a waste of time and money. Look at the lack of border-crossing red tape within Europe where, despite having much more experience with terrorism, they recognize the potential risk is outweighed by the certain damage caused by erecting barriers to travel and trade.

In truth, the border procedure for those crossing between Victoria and Washington state is quick, pleasant and painless if you have the proper documents - but that's a big "if."

"It's the passport issue that's holding back the Americans," says Bourree. A quarter of Americans held a passport in 2008. The figure has inched up to maybe 35 per cent now, but that's still leaves two-thirds of Americans locked inside their own country.

That hasn't hurt airlines that much - U.S. air travel to Canada has only dropped 11 per cent since 9/11 - but the land and ferry crossing have been hit hard. "It's really rubber-tire traffic that we're losing," Bourree says.

Ryan Burles, the president and CEO of the Black Ball Ferry Line, which operates the Coho, agrees the document rules hurt the bottom line.

"I think there was a perception before 9/11 that the border was almost seamless." ID requirements weren't always rigorously enforced. "There were lots of people who came up with library cards."

"We're down 25 to 30 per cent from pre-9/11 days," Burles says. If business has climbed in the past couple of years, it's largely due to Canadians taking advantage of our strong dollar.

The Victoria Clipper's Darrell Bryan sees that, too, Island-bound passengers boarding in Seattle with Macy's and Nordstrom's bags dangling from their arms. Business rose in 2010, and is up maybe 10 per cent again this summer, but that's due largely to Canadian shoppers chasing deals.

Something else is up, too: the number of American travellers rejected by Canadian authorities. "This month, we've already had 27 passengers turned back because of something in their history," Bryan said at the end of August. Might be a coincidence, but the number barred from entering Canada has jumped since Clipper began giving the Canadian Border Services Agency its manifests.

That's a far cry from Bryan's days growing up in Montreal, when the only real question during family jaunts across the line to New York was whether one of the kids would narc out dad when the Customs guy asked about booze and cigarettes.

Border red tape might not be the focus on this 10th anniversary of 9/11. (Note that a three-metre section of I-beam from Ground Zero is to be dedicated in a Port Angeles park today.)

Still, both Canada and the U.S. need to find a way to separate effective security from expensive, economy-killing bureaucracy - because in truth, Canada's border efforts have less to do with playing Whack-A-Mole with terrorists than they do with preventing Uncle Sam from slamming the door.

Consider this observation from Gordon Smith, Canada's former deputy minister of foreign affairs and the current executive director of UVic's Centre For Global Studies: "What we are doing is all about ensuring the Americans that our border is under control."

Read more: <http://www.timescolonist.com/news/9-11-anniversary/Attacks+still+felt+here+Island/5384440/story.html#ixzz1XkpW1A5>.