

## Lakes of whisky and perfume

Duty-free retailers are up in arms about new airport-security rules for liquids.

"THE Russians get so angry that they drink a bottle of vodka on the spot and a few irate passengers have thrown bottles of perfume at our security personnel," says Edgar Engert, a spokesman for Munich's airport operator. To comply with European Union (EU) security rules, airport employees confiscate thousands of litres of alcohol and perfume every week from air passengers making connections in EU airports.

The rules were introduced after Britain's security services foiled a plot to blow up airliners using liquid explosives last August. Scanners cannot detect liquid explosives, so a 100ml limit was imposed on liquids, gels and pastes in hand luggage. Exemptions can be made for baby food, medicine and items bought at duty-free shops beyond the security barrier. Those travelling within the EU's 27 member states plus Norway, Iceland and Switzerland can take duty-free goods on connecting flights, provided they are in tamper-proof bags. The problem is that transit passengers arriving from elsewhere cannot.

In December the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), a global standards body, adopted the EU rules and recommended that its 189 member countries introduce them by March 1st. Japan, South Korea, Fiji, Indonesia and Taiwan complied, but many countries missed the deadline. Worse, the application of the rules varies widely. By April new rules for liquids will come into force in Australia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Morocco, Tunisia and 30 other countries. But all of them are a bit different.

This is disastrous for the duty-free trade. According to the European Travel Retail Council (ETRC), a lobby group, sales have fallen by as much as 40% as passengers stay away, worried that goods they buy will be confiscated. The ETRC is especially upset about Australia's regulations, under which passengers will be screened on arrival and containers of liquid over 100ml confiscated. Unless the exception for tamper-proof bags is adopted globally, the duty-free trade will slowly fall apart, it warns.

Do the rules improve security? After a heated debate with members of the European Parliament (MEPs), Jacques Barrot, the EU transport commissioner, promised to investigate. "If these measures had helped to hunt down terrorists, we would have heard about it," says Reinhard Rack, an Austrian MEP. The ETRC and MEPs are pushing Mr Barrot to negotiate bilateral agreements on rules for transit passengers. Some two dozen countries including Dubai, South Africa and Hong Kong have approached the EU for such a deal. Further complicating matters, new EU rules on hand luggage come into force on May 6th. Expect more airport altercations.

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