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Section: PERSPECTIVE

Privacy stays home this year: THE MORALIST

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Heading out for the holidays? Planning to take a plane? If you want to reach your destination smiling, leave your expectations of privacy at home.

Get out your government-issued identification; anonymous travel is a thing of the past.

Take off your shoes, your coat and your jacket. Empty your pockets and toss the contents into an open bin. Display your intimate toiletries in a transparent plastic bag. Plop your possessions on the conveyer belt. Computer casings could conceal a bomb, so don't forget to place your laptop in a separate bin. Wait patiently in a meandering line as everyone's baggage rolls through the X-ray machine so human eyes can check for dangerous contraband.

Now, you may be selected on the basis of secret government criteria for an extra tier of inspection. (I seem to get chosen whenever I make a last-minute change in my reservations.) Try not to cringe as you are escorted out of line and taken to a corner for a manual inspection of your carry-on luggage and a clinical pat-down.

If you have the time and courage to ask for special treatment, a security officer will conduct the pat-down in a private room. Whether in public or in private, security will do to you what television cops do to the bad guys.

An officer of your own gender will ask you to stand spread-eagle with your arms outstretched. He or she will carefully feel along the length of your limbs and torso in search of weapons or explosives stashed under your clothing. When that's over, you'll have to stand by for the manual carry-on baggage inspection.

In front of everyone, a uniformed stranger will go item by item through your carry-on bags - maxi-pads, medicines, half-eaten sandwiches, dirty clothes and all.

The routine pat-down may be on its way out. This year, designated travelers who begin

their trips at the Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport will be offered a security screening alternative soon to show up in other airports: the full-body X-ray.

If you prefer not to be touched, choose the full-body "peep-through" X-ray option. You will be asked to stand in front of an enormous "backscatter" X-ray machine. This closet-sized camera will create a telling picture of your naked glory, revealing in highest relief any metals and plastics on your person or inside your body, including handguns, plastic explosives and ceramic knives. The images of your body are apparently concealed from fellow travelers and inessential security workers, and then deleted when the security analysis is complete.

The Transportation Safety Administration's Web site touts the "privacy benefits" of backscatter peep-through technology. But the backscatter X-ray has privacy benefits only when compared to the very creepy option of being pawed by a perfect stranger.

I believe passenger inspections help deter terrorism. But let's be frank about the privacy implications of airport security. Authorities haven't yet come up with an airport security process that doesn't significantly violate traditional expectations of privacy.

Airport security - whether conducted with X-ray machines, screening wands, human hands and eyes, or tiny nanotechnologies - requires that passengers give up anonymity, modesty and data control. Effective transportation security is vital, but current security practices extract privacy sacrifices and foster lower expectations of privacy among travelers.

Critics of heightened security measures worry that constitutional rights are being violated by profiling, searches and seizures. Because the Founding Fathers believed individuals have legitimate expectations of privacy in their persons and property, the Fourth Amendment prohibits searches and seizures in the absence of a warrant issued by a judge or magistrate based on probable cause and individualized suspicion.

But the courts allow many health, safety and national security exceptions to the warrant requirement. The constitutionality of rational airport security measures that diminish privacy is not in serious doubt. So the only legal question is whether the TSA has or will order a level of surveillance in which the government has no reasonable, legitimate interest.

Defenders of airport security measures emphasize that any privacy invasions are brief and inflicted with civility by trained professionals. They also point to an undeniable fact: choice. No one has to fly, and when someone chooses to buy a ticket and get on a plane, they are implicitly consenting to the necessities of airline security.

These arguments are sound, but something of an overstatement. If your father is critically ill in Phoenix and you live in New Jersey, then Amtrak, Greyhound and the family car are not meaningful travel options. You have to fly. And if you do fly you will have to put up with about an hour of privacy invasions each time.

And even professionally administered, necessary security procedures are potentially demoralizing. Why demoralizing? Is it a big deal to show your driver's license, take off your shoes in public, and empty your pockets? What's so bad about opening your purse or watching someone go through your luggage? Is standing in front of a backscatter machine demeaning?

Frequent travelers get used to TSA procedures. And when new procedures spring up, like the quart-size bag requirement for three-ounce toiletries, we mostly take them in stride. But it's demoralizing to be herded along and asked to perform a routine of government-mandated tasks that violate privacy norms and whose purposes may not be clear.

Some of the technology we encounter in airports is puzzling, even a bit bizarre. I don't just mean the new backscatter machines and the shoe-heel analyzers. Last year, the TSA introduced an "explosives detection trace portal" at Newark Liberty International Airport's Terminal A. Departing passengers are ushered into the portal and doused with puffs of air to release tiny particles that are analyzed for traces of explosives.

The technology of airline security is complex and mysterious. To the average traveler it can be alienating and induce anxiety. Moreover, it's potentially embarrassing to have one's body and possessions scrutinized. What we carry on trips tells a story about who we are that we might prefer not to share with total strangers.

And there's the matter of modesty. Modesty is an important value embraced by many individuals and religious groups. Modesty prohibits certain types of physical contact with others. Modesty norms may require a woman or a man to conceal their hair, eyes, face, legs, breasts or buttocks, no less than their genitals. TSA offers same-sex and closed-door screening in recognition of modesty. But the pace of the security screening process would be reduced to a crawl if everyone demanded the privacy they feel they truly deserve.

So stand we cooperative holiday revelers, shoeless, spread-eagle, teeth clenched. Too bad we can't all get to grandmother's house in a one-horse open sleigh, eh?