

A day at DEN. The Denver International airport. Our 2026 August 24 flight was supposed to leave Winnipeg at 8:45 AM, change planes at Denver and then get to Burbank, California at 12:30 PM. Since we are traveling Westbound, there is a two-hour gain in time zone correction. The trip did not turn out that way; there were 10 official delays in the flights, three from Winnipeg to Denver and seven from Denver to Burbank and we arrived back home in Calabasas at 12:30 AM the next day. Fortunately, Chris had two United Club passes which helped pass the time since the Club had comfortable seating, couches, and assorted food items. I spent a lot of time watching the airport terminal operations with planes going in all directions from the terminal.

Lessons Learned: The Denver International Airport Automated Baggage-Handling System

The Denver International Airport (DIA) is renowned for its iconic tent-like structure, but it is also infamous in engineering and project management circles for its ambitious, yet flawed, automated baggage-handling system. This system, which was intended to revolutionize the airport industry, instead became a case study in the pitfalls of over-ambitious engineering and poor project management.

The automated baggage-handling system was designed in the early 1990s to be the jewel in DIA's crown. It promised to use cutting-edge technology to transport luggage from check-in to aircraft with minimal human intervention, thereby increasing efficiency, reducing mishandled luggage, and improving passenger experience. However, the system never fully functioned as intended, leading to significant delays in the airport's opening and substantial financial losses. There were many factors that led to the failure of the system.

Louis comments: I spent a lot of time during the day looking at the baggage system at DEN. It looked like the baggage system at other airports with many carts being pulled around by small one-person engines scattered about the premises. I asked myself the question: What happened to the supposed state-of-the-art baggage system what was supposed to be in place across the very scattered terminal system at the airport and the large distance from plane parking to central terminal? Apparently, there has been far more thought put into the system failure than the original design. There are three major sets of long linear plane parking areas, labeled A, B, and C as well as a main multiple tent-appearing covered main terminal. They are now trying to implement a newly designed baggage system just for Terminal A. The original new airport opened in 1995 and the automated luggage handling still does not exist.

My standard comment about the original luggage system is that it operated at a high speed, tossing some bags off the belt on a curve through a thin wall. The hole in the wall was then repaired and the bags were recovered from behind that wall years later during a remodel.

There is also an automated train that runs from the main terminal out to the middle of the plane terminals A, B and C. It was overcrowded and inconvenient when I was there and there was a every 5-minute bus service from the main terminal out to Terminal B. When we went through from Burbank to Winnipeg, the Burbank plane landed at the West end of Terminal A, and the Winnipeg plane left from the East end of Terminal B. That distance is about one mile with two elevator trips and one underground train ride. There are some moving walkways along the terminals and an occasional electric cart shuttle. I used the wheelchair service provided by the airport to handle that long distance between the inbound gate and the outbound gate.