SWEDE BECOMES FIRST PERSON TO BOARD A PLANE WITH JUST A WAVE OF HIS HAND

News / Airports / Routes

Andreas Sjostrom boarded a flight from Stockholm to Paris in December without a boarding pass or even his phone.

As throngs of weary travellers streamed through one of Europe's busiest travel hubs, the female security guard at Stockholm Arlanda Airport looked up at Andreas Sjostrom, confused.

Somehow, without a boarding pass or even a smartphone, Sjostrom had managed to activate her scanner, and the system was telling her to let him in.

Sjostrom is not a robot or a Jason Bourne-style secret assassin; he's simply a curious Swede who decided to have a microchip implanted in his hand with his frequent flyer identification number on it.

He's the first person in the world to get on a plane this way, sailing through security, then into the

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Scandinavian Airlines lounge and onto his flight to Paris in late December.

“It was a fluent experience,” Sjostrom, the vice-president of digital for a tech consulting company, told the Star by phone from Stockholm.

“Just the feeling that I carry something that cannot run out of batteries because it’s not battery-powered — it’s awakened by the reader when I come close to it, and I can’t lose it … I am actually carrying the right to travel. You can strip me of everything and the system will let me in anyway.”

The 43-year-old is a frequent flyer on Scandinavian Airlines. He bought a kit online and had the airline encrypt his EuroBonus number, used to keep track of bookings, on what’s called a near field communication (NFC) chip.

He then had a nurse inject the chip into his hand. And when he placed it over the scanners at the airport, the machines could read the data.

Obsessed with technology as a child, Sjostrom said he learned to program when he was 10 years old and wrote an essay at 13 entitled “Happiness is to write code that does good things.”

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Andreas Sjostrom has been fascinated by technology since he was a child. He says he does worry about p
Andreas Sjostrom has been fascinated by technology since he was a child. He says he does worry about privacy and possible misuse of implanted microchips, but notes he has similar concerns about using his smartphone or laptop.

He turned himself into a guinea pig simply because he wanted to know if going through airport security with a microchip would work, he added.

Through this type of experiment, “you find out what are the issues and problems,” he said, noting he does worry about privacy and possible misuse, but is also concerned when he uses his smartphone and opens his laptop.

“Of course we need to take these questions seriously,” he said.

Sjostrom ordered the implant from a Seattle-based website called Dangerous Things. Founder and CEO Amal Graafstra said the company sells a variety of implantable transponders, based on the same concept as microchips for pets. The most popular model goes for about $100 (U.S.).

Graafstra has a chip implanted in each hand, using them to do everything from getting into his house to starting his motorcycle.

It eliminates the need for keys, which he calls one of the “three burdens,” the other two being a phone and a wallet/purse. He likens the trio to a “modern-day Tamagotchi,” referring to the Japanese digital pet introduced in 1996, because they demand so much of our daily attention.

“It’s incredibly freeing” not having to carry anything else, he said over the phone from Seattle.

“(You) feel like you’re communicating with machines directly as a human being. You’ve upgraded yourself.”

Graafstra said most of his clients use implants for things like unlocking a house or accessing a computer, although one man put in a chip with an animated GIF that would show up on a phone when scanned.

“He called it a digital tattoo,” Graafstra said, adding that he does not recommend customers inject chips themselves and that the company offers a locator map of professional body piercers who are trained to insert them.

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COURTESY OF AMAL GRAAFSTRA

A website called Dangerous Things sells a variety of implantable transponders, used by most customers to unlock their homes or start their cars.

But Sjostrom's successful experiment doesn't mean the rest of us will be waving goodbye to boarding passes any time soon.

Pernilla Edelsvard, head of digital experience at Scandinavian Airlines, said by phone from Stockholm that the company has no plans to make chips a regular part of flying. "We don't think our customers are ready yet to put in a chip.

"The technology is not there. But it will be there. I think in five years' time you will probably have (a chip) in your hand."

Still, the airline is experimenting with rings and wristbands embedded with chips to make boarding smoother for frequent travellers.

It would technically be possible for another customer to use a chip to board a Scandinavian Airlines flight, but they would have to contact the airline in advance to have their number encrypted on it, she said.

In an emailed statement, Health Canada spokesperson Sean Upton wrote that no microchips have been approved as medical devices in this country and the safety and effectiveness of the products are unknown.

Sjostrom still has his implant, which is visible beneath his skin when he stretches it. He may try to put different data on it, such as a bank PIN.

"It's going to stay for a while, I think," he said. "Until I'm done experimenting. Or maybe until the next generation of chip comes around."

01 FEBRUARY 2016

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