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Flight of fancy to Silicon Valley

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Residents of Silicon Valley in California always breathe a sigh of relief when they can fly in and out of the Mineta San Jose International Airport rather than the San Francisco airport. Now like our own Silicon Valley in Bangalore, the airport is a flight of fancy.

The Mineta airport has received a billion-dollar facelift and the highlight of this makeover is at the top of the new Terminal B's escalator.

This area stands on a mezzanine filled with natural light and has an imposing 'Space Observer,' which will make you breathless.

This airport is by no means the most modern airport in the world, but it is like none other in the entire United States. It synthesizes the outdoorsy sun loving nature of old San Jose and the technological genius of the Silicon Valley.

When most airports were beginning to look alike, architects Gensler polled the public in the Bay Area about what they wanted and went for this dichotomy which reflects the character of the city that is no longer just a suburb of San Francisco.

Gensler describes the airport as two metaphors for the design. The first is a data cable, which imagines people as information packets going through a long tube. The other one is a canopy that Mediterranean towns throw over narrow streets for shade. This is to represent the pleasant climate of the Bay Area.

The project had a budget of \$4.5 billion but when the economy and passenger travel crashed, it was slashed to \$1.3 billion; but even this resulted in a great renovation effort including such features as a state-of-the-art solar powered rental garage for 3,000 cars. Curtis Fentress, the principal architect in the company, which was involved in the fine tuning and construction, believes that "it (the airport) will soon be part of people's image of San Jose. This will land on post cards of the city."

Functionally, the Parking is located conveniently right in front of the terminal. The terminal features 62-ft (approx. 19 metres) glass walls and radiant natural light. There are 26 new ticketing counters. The terminal is equipped with the country's most advanced and efficient baggage screening systems.

Four CT scan machines use three-dimensional X-ray imaging to search for plastic or other non-metallic explosives. There are brown and beige formations in the marble-like floors, which guide you to your destinations within the airport. "People will move along this building like electrodes in a wire," say the builders.

Now that you have met the Space Observer, it is time to head to the modern security area.

Four full body scanners (the first in the US) will take front and back X-rays of passengers and anything under their clothes.

The highlight of your airport experience will be 'eCloud' hanging from the ceiling above the new food court.

The sculpture consists of 2,000 glass panes, each 20x20 cm in size, each told by a computer to change colours as the temperatures rise and fall around the world. The distinctive feature of eCloud is that it never looks the same from one moment to the next.

The food floor has old favourites and some more exotic gourmet chains. When it's time to sit down, you can do so on 90 air chairs,' along the glass walls of the concourse. The cooling system is unique and highly energy efficient.

When you drive away from the airport, you'll almost feel like waving at "hands," a huge, steel sculpture draped around the seven-storey garage.

This sculpture says hello and goodbye at the same time, which is the way San Jose treats history. And yes, there is a lot to see and do in this city so do leave the airport no matter how fascinated you are by it!