

# LGB: hip, contemporary, and proud of its past

*by Ken Donohue*



*The airport is in the Los Angeles area with five runways and an IATA code beginning with 'L'. But it's not Los Angeles International Airport, or LAX as that gateway to the world is widely known. In fact, LAX may be one of the world's busiest airports, but it has only four runways. However, 20mi (32 km) south is Long Beach (LGB—Airways, November 2002 & May 1999), which boasts a complex geometry developed during World War II.*



In anticipation of overseas orders, Boeing is building a dozen more C-17s at Long Beach, which would keep the line open until the end of 2015. Hardware and software upgrades to US Air Force C-17s will keep the plant active until at least the end of 2022. This Qatar Emiri Air Force C-17 is operated for the Qatar Amiri Flight and sports the colors of Qatar Airways.

**L**ong Beach Airport—also known as Daugherty Field after local aviation pioneer Earl S Daugherty—celebrates its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. At Daugherty's urging, the City of Long Beach—with revenue from the flow of oil from nearby Signal Hill—established a municipal airport at the current site in 1923, and aviation has flowed through the veins of this city ever since. Playing an

important rôle in LGB's history was the Douglas Aircraft Company (DAC), which opened a factory there in 1941 (*Airways*, July 2005). Between 1942 and 1945, DAC built some 30,000 aircraft at Long Beach, its largest plant. After Douglas merged with McDonnell Aircraft Corporation in 1967, the DC-8 and DC-9 series continued to be assembled here, along with the DC-10 and MD-11.



PHOTOS: AERO PACIFIC IMAGES-MIKE CARTER

The former 717 factory, complete with the famous Douglas sign, has recently been leased to Mercedes-Benz.

But with industry consolidation, the Boeing 717 (which started life as a DC-9 derivative, the MD-95) was the last airliner built at Long Beach, with production ending in 2006 (*Airways*, September 2006). However, Boeing still produces the C-17A Globemaster III military transport at Long Beach.

The historic terminal, which houses the check-in counters, a restaurant, and some administration offices, is still the airport's focal point. But December 2012 saw the opening of two new passenger concourses. The north concourse, with seven gates, is used exclusively by JetBlue Airways, which has the majority of operations at LGB, while the four-gate south concourse serves Alaska Airlines, Delta Air Lines, and US Airways.

Simple and functional in design, the concourse nevertheless has a contemporary and welcoming feel with lots of open space. You might think you're in a resort hotel with its wine bar, fire pit, outdoor seating, onsite executive and sushi chefs, and a wine steward, along with an impressive outdoor garden lined with towering palms. "We built something that is really congruent with Long Beach," Mario Rodriguez, the airport's director, tells *Airways*. "It's chic, but not pretentious." Passengers can feel a connection to the airfield thanks to floor-to-ceiling windows that allow a clear view of ramp activity.

Rodriguez has been in the business for 25 years, having run airports in New Orleans and Florida, while consulting internationally in Kuwait and Hong Kong. What he knew about Long Beach was mainly the controversy between the airport administration and the community over the proposed expansion and the building of a new terminal. But Rodriguez brought a fresh approach and leadership style that wasn't divisive. "We've been able to tilt things in the right way," he says. "Relations with the community were poor, but things have changed and we're now transparent with them and communicate regularly. This way we can better understand one another, and the community has come to see this as their airport."

Rae Gabelich was one of many local residents who were very vocal against any expansion. In fact, she was so troubled by the direction the city and the airport were taking that she ended up running for public office, and was elected to city council in 2004, serving two terms. "Long Beach was a sleepy little airport that people had come to live with, and everyone was happy," says Gabelich. "But in June 2001 there was a small article in the local newspaper that the mayor at the time, Beverly O'Neill, had opened the door to JetBlue and we were concerned about the negative impact on our community. This was always our fear when they built the 10,000 feet [3,048m] runway [12/30]."

As often happens with causes like this, the movement



PHOTOS: LGB

The recent terminal upgrades include a fire pit and garden.



AERO PACIFIC IMAGES: MIKE CARTER

For decades, LGB has been home to a completion center for Gulfstream biz-jets, which arrive 'green' from Savannah, Georgia. This is a G550.

began on a small scale, with only five people who met weekly. They formed a group called ‘HUSH2’: Homes Under Stress and Hazard. This led to a groundswell of support. Unsurprisingly, air quality and noise pollution were the biggest concerns. In addition, people living in two neighborhoods near the airport pay high property taxes, and they were concerned about the value of their homes. A case of ‘NIMBY-ism’ (‘not in my backyard’) perhaps, but while there were some who wanted the airport to close down altogether, others simply wanted sensible development.

“I was so incensed that the city council wasn’t listening to the community,” Gabelich tells *Airways*. “The US Navy had left Long Beach, and the city had a wish list to transform the city. They thought if they could expand the airport they could grow tourism, and put Long Beach on the map.” Gabelich’s criticism of airport expansion could never be mistaken for a dislike of the airline industry, because if anyone had an appreciation it was Gabelich, who was a flight attendant with United for 36 years.

Rae Gabelich concedes that the airport had become run-down. For the past decade, portable trailers served

as the departure lounge. That less-than-desirable experience had become the norm for many passengers: “An airport is the first and last impression someone has of a city,” says Rodriguez. “And the trailers were a horrible impression for any traveler. If we want to attract business to the city, we needed to improve the experience.”

Certainly there were some tenants who were stridently outspoken about wanting a splashy new image for the airport. Airport management said they needed a 130,000sq ft (12,100m<sup>2</sup>) terminal at a cost of \$100 million. But that grandiose vision was at odds with what the community wanted. After an eight-year battle, compromise won out.

“We were able to bridge the gap, and expand in an appropriate way,” says Rodriguez. “We didn’t want to build something that we couldn’t afford.” The concourse plan was scaled back to cover 74,000sq ft (6,900m<sup>2</sup>), including the garden areas, and was completed five months ahead of schedule at its budgeted \$45 million. Rodriguez adds that most airport terminal buildings have a life span of 30 years, but the industry is constantly changing, and it did not make sense to spend a lot of money on something that might become obsolete. The new terminal really consists of three boxes with the flexibility to be modified should the need arise.

LGB does not have long-term agreements with its airline tenants, and didn’t build the concourse for one specific airline—as some airports have done—which, because of the ever-changing nature of the industry, has had costly consequences. And those who had been so vocal in their opposition to the expansion celebrated with the airport and the community. “Anyone who uses the new terminal gets the ‘wow’ factor,” says Gabelich. “It’s an airport that everyone in Long Beach can be proud of.”



The arrival of JetBlue in 2001 changed the landscape at LGB, where the airline currently holds 32 of 41 daily slots available for airline movements.



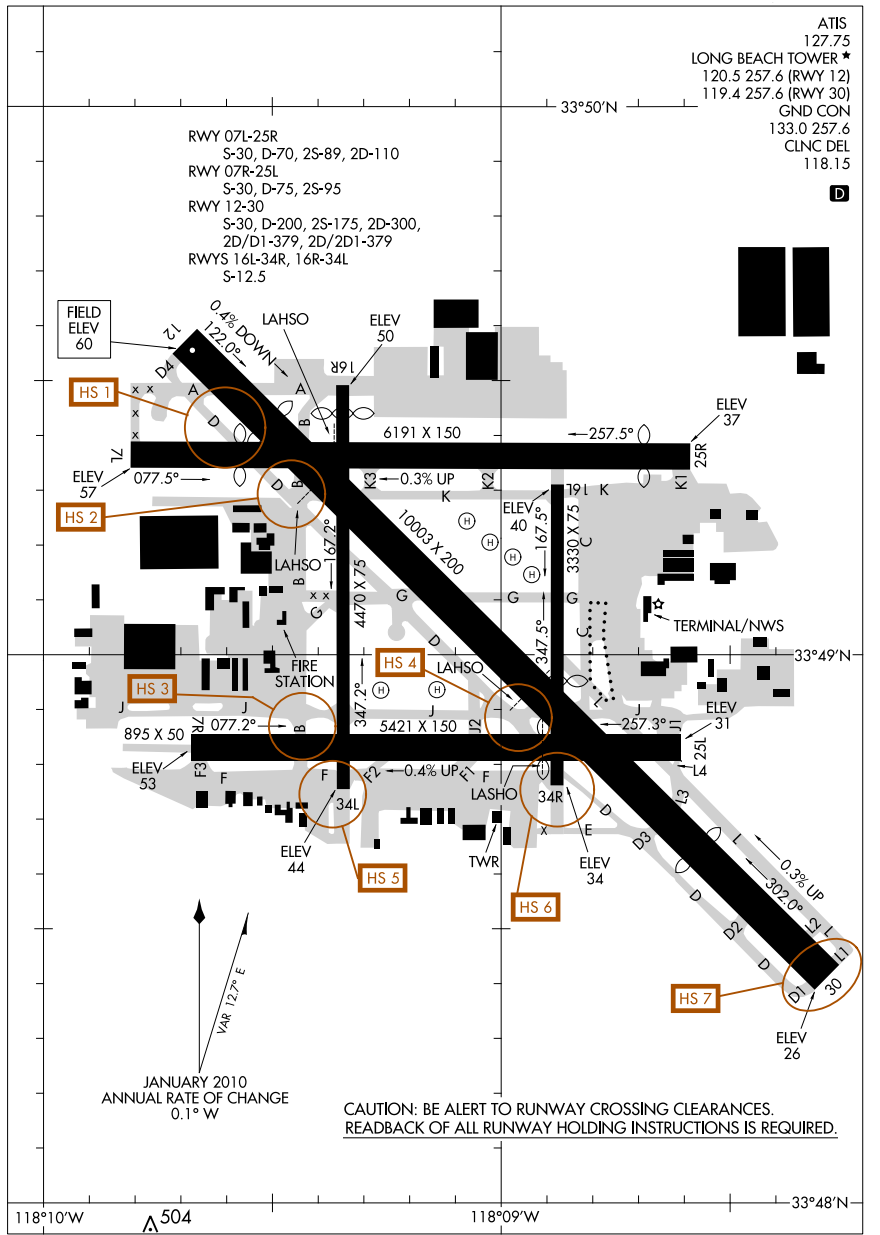
The new terminal is part of a four-phase, \$145 million airport upgrade that includes a parking garage, ramp and runway improvements, restoration of the 1941 terminal, and the concourse. Modernization work on the historic building has restored the original mosaic tiling that had been covered with carpet for decades.

Now LGB boasts a wide array of local restaurants and shops. And with a street pricing policy, travellers can be assured they are not being gouged because they are a captive audience. Rodriguez tells *Airways* that a glass of wine at the airport costs the same as you would pay in one of the city's restaurants. Not surprisingly, given the choice of quality retail outlets, the airport has seen a huge increase in concession revenue. While it is estimated that passengers spend an average of about \$6 at national airports, at Long Beach the estimate is \$9.

LGB wants to welcome travellers and is proud of its high customer service ratings. "In many respects this industry has lost sight of the customer. People are chasing capacity at the expense of customer service," says Rodriguez. "The police officers at our airport help people with their bags; where else will you see that?"

According to Rodriguez, LGB is half the cost to airlines compared to similar airports, and those savings can be passed on to consumers. "We're in the middle of the Los Angeles Basin, and we have the second lowest ticketed prices in the US, next to Atlantic City," he says. "There is a lot of demand to serve LGB. Airlines are waiting in line."

One of those airlines taking advantage of Long Beach's convenience and low cost is JetBlue, which inaugurated service here in August 2001. This was not JetBlue's first foray to California, having previously served Ontario, east of Los Angeles, from New York-JFK. But LGB is what really started JetBlue's expansion on the West Coast. "Long Beach is a convenient, low-cost alternative to other Los Angeles airports," says John Checketts, JetBlue's director of network planning. "As a leisure airline that appeals to us. We can offer lower fares and get people to



**AIRPORT DIAGRAM**  
12320  
LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA  
LONG BEACH (DAUGHERTY FIELD) (LGB) FMA

LGB's longest runway, 12/30, built in the Forties, was extended to its present length in 1955 and sees the majority of commercial movements; except in Santa Ana (easterly) wind conditions, 30 is the usual direction. Runway 25L/7R is used mostly for general aviation; 25R/7L is a secondary strip; 16L/34R has been closed for a few years while ramp improvements were made at the passenger terminal, and 16R/34L is used only a few times a month by flight schools, but costs \$1 million a year to maintain.



MARRIOTT

The Marriott Airport Hotel overlooks the threshold of Runway 30.

their destination faster.” Of the 41 slots available at LGB, JetBlue has 32.

While the airline has been able to build its brand in the West, transcontinental services to LGB from Boston and New York have been more challenging. “LAX is what most people east of Denver think of for a Los Angeles airport,” points out Checketts. JetBlue’s former Long Beach–Chicago O’Hare route struggled for this reason. “It takes considerable investment and time to build awareness that LGB is a viable option. And in the case of Chicago it wasn’t an investment we could make.” Checketts does admit, however, that JetBlue didn’t have a strong presence in Chicago to begin with.

Given the competitive forces, LAX couldn’t be ignored forever, so in June 2009 JetBlue started serving that airport. While committed to Long Beach as a focus city, the airport’s slot restrictions played a part in the decision to start operations at LAX.

“One of the cool things about Long Beach is boarding of the aircraft,” adds Checketts. “Our passengers like the experience of climbing the stairs and seeing the exterior of the aircraft. And when people learn of the new passenger concourse, they’ll be bypassing LAX.”

Apart from an erratic and illogical industry, as Rodriguez notes, the biggest challenge facing LGB is the noise pollution issue. “We have three million passengers a year, not because we are in the middle of nowhere, because we clearly are not, but rather because of the noise ordinance, which currently restricts the airport to 41 air carrier and 25 commuter (75,000lb/34,000kg airplane weight and below) slots per day.” The airport coordinates with the military and sends electronic alerts to residents when it is known that loud military aircraft will be operating at LGB.

The ordinance, one of the strictest in the USA, sets the number of flights based on the noise budget. There are 18 noise monitors dispersed throughout the airport and community. As noise levels decline there is an opportunity to increase the number of flights. With the use of quieter aircraft, the noise contour now exists within the airport

property and not out in the community. But given the sensitivity of and toward area residents, Rodriguez says the airport would have to see a multi-year trend before additional flights are considered. He adds that the unintended consequence of the ordinance is that it is a restriction against interstate commerce. Federal laws now prevent the kind of legislation in place at LGB.

While owned by the City of Long Beach, the airport is self-funding and does not draw on the resources of local taxpayers. In fact, LGB admits to having a healthy balance sheet, but because the industry is cyclical and significantly impacted by global events, it will continue to diversify its operations. Currently, one-third of the airport’s revenue comes from airline activities, while the bulk—41%—is generated from indirect air transport activities, such as parking, concessions, and rental car tenants.

LGB has a local economic impact of some \$6 billion a year, and creates about 18,000 jobs in the area, almost 9% of the total employment in Long Beach.

One executive told me that the airport pays homage to the past, but celebrates the future. The future is here for LGB; the biggest orange isn’t always the sweetest. And the airport’s management knows that it will never be a major terminus; but with a refreshing approach to customer service, quality, and the convenience factor, LGB makes flying fun again. ➔

## Fast Facts—LGB

**Scheduled passenger airlines:** Alaska Airlines\*, Delta Air Lines (seasonal), Delta Connection\*, JetBlue Airways, US Airways, US Airways Express\*\*

\*operated by SkyWest Airlines

\*\*operated by Mesa Airlines

**Passengers (2012):** 2,978,433

**Aircraft movements (2012):** 271,771

### Top ten nonstop destinations (n° of pax/airlines)

Salt Lake City	219,000	Delta, JetBlue
Las Vegas	205,000	JetBlue
Seattle	192,000	Alaska, JetBlue
Oakland	163,000	JetBlue
Portland	140,000	Alaska, JetBlue
San Francisco	138,000	JetBlue
Phoenix	117,000	US Airways
Sacramento	115,000	JetBlue
New York	87,000	JetBlue
Washington, DC	50,000	JetBlue

**Owner/operator:** City of Long Beach

**Website:** [www.LGB.org](http://www.LGB.org)