



# Tijuana Airport

## BRIDGING NATIONS

Tijuana Airport (TIJ) sits teasingly close to the United States, just 100ft (30m) from the border. The crossing between Tijuana and San Diego is one of the busiest land border crossings in the world, with more than 30 million people passing through annually.

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**STORY & PHOTOS** *Ken Donohue*



**THESE DAYS**, when people talk about the border between the United States and Mexico, the conversation usually turns to the building of walls. But, at Tijuana Airport, they have built a bridge between the two nations instead.

The airport, named after former Mexican president General Abelardo L. Rodríguez, is Mexico's fifth busiest, with about six million passengers expected this year. It is the second most connected airport in Mexico, with service to more than 30 domestic destinations. Many people use the airport as a gateway when traveling between Mexico and southern California.

However, while uniquely positioned to take advantage of traffic between California and Mexico, TIJ used to be hampered by a chaotic border crossing, with waiting times of two to four hours.

That's where the new Cross Border Xpress (CBX) Bridge came in.

## CROSS BORDER XPRESS

People had long floated ideas on how to connect TIJ with California. One even included building a runway on the US side, but that and so many other ideas never panned out. Then, in 2007, a future CBX investor, who was looking out of the control tower at TIJ toward the US side, saw large swaths of undeveloped land; an idea was born.

A group of potential investors went to Grupo Aeroportuario del Pacífico (GAP), which operates 12 airports in Mexico, including TIJ, and asked whether they would have been interested



**1** TIJ is Mexico's fifth busiest airport and sees six million passengers a year. The passenger terminal was constructed in 1970.

**PHOTO: CARLOS LOPEZ**

**2** The \$120 million Cross Border Xpress Terminal and Bridge in San Diego, opened in December 2015.

**3** The CBX is an enclosed pedestrian skywalk bridge exclusively for Tijuana Airport passengers who cross the US/Mexico border as part of their trip.

in operating a terminal on the US side, connected to Tijuana Airport by a bridge. GAP wasn't; so a private company was formed, which acquired 55 acres of land on the US side, directly across from the airport.

It sounds simple enough; but building a bridge between a terminal in one country and an airport in another was a challenge for a number of reasons. Also, given the emotional rhetoric that is tied to anything that has to do with the US-Mexico border, there were a lot of naysayers. They said it couldn't be done because the regulatory approval requirements would be too great.

Yet, the CBX backers were undeterred. In 2010, they began building federal support from both Mexico and the US, along with state and city permits. Construction began in 2014, and the facility opened in December 2015.



"This was a great achievement," says Elizabeth Brown, Chief Commercial Officer for Cross Border Xpress, "This is very unique and it had never been done before anywhere in the world."

The \$120 million, 72,000sq ft facility, which bills itself as the Tijuana Airport Terminal in San Diego, consists of two buildings, one for departures and the other for arrivals, and was designed by the late Ricardo Legorreta, an acclaimed Mexican architect who was known for using cubic designs and bold colors.



And, while there is a modern simplicity to his work, it very purposefully incorporates elements of traditional Mexican architecture into the buildings' design.

The terminal has an open and welcoming feel, with high ceilings and windows that let in lots of natural light. The departures area has 10 check-in counters; however, after checking in, passengers must carry their baggage across the border to the planes, which are all on the Mexican side.

The 390ft enclosed pedestrian skywalk bridge is exclusively for use by those TIJ passengers whose flights are scheduled to depart within 24 hours of crossing; also, passengers arriving into TIJ must cross over to the US within two hours of landing. The terminal has a small café, a duty-free shop, and a VIP lounge for Aeromexico Business Class passengers.

Using the bridge costs \$16 one way, or \$30 round-trip, and is



free for children under two years of age. The rate for families of up to six members is \$55 one way.

Aeromexico and Volaris passengers can pay their Cross Border Xpress fees when they purchase their tickets. The fee can be paid either at the terminal or online.

And it is convenient; in just five or 10 minutes you can be at your gate, having passed through both US and Mexican customs and immigration control.

“We are happy with the number of passengers we’ve seen, but need to market the service more and start changing travel habits,” says Brown.

“People need to feel and see the terminal, and once they try us they will think this is the best way to cross the border when flying through Tijuana.”

The word is out. In the first seven months after its December 2015 opening, over 600,000



passengers had used the facility, with more than 5,800 passing through on one day alone.

“Almost 60% of passengers traveling out of Tijuana cross the border from the US,” Brown tells *Airways*. “We’re hoping to capture about half those passengers.” Currently, about 18% of TIJ passengers are using the Cross Border Xpress.

I spoke to one person, traveling with his family, who had used the CBX four times. Asked what he thought of the facility, he said, “One word—perfect!”

## US-MEXICO COOPERATION

One of the biggest challenges was constructing the bridge, which is comprised of six sections—three for arrivals and three for departures. Two of these segments were built in Mexico and four in the US.

To allow installation of the US-built pieces by crane without infringing on the Mexican side, the border had to be temporarily moved several feet by law. Despite the different systems of measurement used in the US and Mexico, everything fit into place.

The airport itself had to make some modifications to the terminal to accommodate the bridge. CBX cites the strong partnership with GAP, the airport operator, for the success of the project. Among other things, GAP has helped with marketing CBX throughout Mexico.

Seventy-five percent of the investors are Mexican, with the remaining equity coming from



US ones. Land has been set aside for future development, which could include low-density shopping, a hotel, and a rental car center.

CBX is proof of what is possible when people and nations work together.

## THE RISE OF TIJUANA

Tijuana Airport opened for commercial operations in 1951 with a small passenger terminal and a single runway (10/28), but the airport only really started taking off in 1970, when a new terminal was constructed—which, albeit having undergone renovations over the decades, is still in use today—and a new runway (09/27) replaced the previous one. The first flight out of the new airport was an Aeromexico (AM) service to Mexico City (MEX).

Throughout the early part of its history during which the airport was managed by the government, it saw very little development. This began to change in 1998,

when the government started setting up four groups to operate airports throughout Mexico, one of which was the Grupo Aeroportuario del Pacifico (GAP).

In 2006, that private agency began operating TIJ under a 50-year concession from the government. “It was a huge change in the way the airport operates as a private company,” says airport Managing Director Guillermo Villalba Morales, who has been at TIJ for 12 years.

“The airport is friendlier, more efficient, and we have been able to improve the airport infrastructure.”

The airport is well connected domestically, being second only to MEX for number of routes served; however, its international offerings are sparse: just three flights a week to Oakland (OAK), operated by Mexican low-cost carrier Volaris (Y4); and three flights a week to Shanghai (PVG) on Aeromexico’s Boeing 787s, originating from MEX.

4 The modern CBX building at night.

5 This plaque inside the pedestrian skywalk bridge marks the US/Mexico Border.

6 Mexican LCC Volaris is the largest operator at TIJ, with more than two-thirds of the airport’s total flights.

PHOTO: CARLOS LOPEZ

7 VivaAerobus offers flights from Tijuana to Monterrey and Mexico City.

PHOTO: CARLOS LOPEZ



Given the longstanding cultural ties between Tijuana and China, about 30% of passengers on the Shanghai flight board in TIJ. Aeromexico used to route its MEX-Tokyo (NRT) service through Tijuana, but those flights now operate through Monterrey (MTY).

“Absolutely, we want to grow the number of domestic and international destinations,” says Morales.

“There are a number of global companies doing business in Tijuana, and this is expected to grow.”

In fact, Chinese carrier Hainan Airlines (HU) recently filed an application with China’s Civil Administration to serve MEX from Beijing (PEK) via TIJ. Even though this is still in the early stages and no decision has been made by the regulators in either China or Mexico, it is expected to be approved soon.

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## AIRPORT LAYOUT

A major \$61 million renovation—including an expanded terminal, and improvements on taxiways and runway—commenced last year and is expected to be completed in 2019.

The current terminal—which is U-shaped, with six gates extending out along each side—is being expanded directly to the east, allowing for four additional gates, a hotel, and an office building.

The airport’s retail offerings are also being modernized. All of this is welcome news to passengers; the current departure lounges are quite small and provide limited seating, especially when multiple gates are in use. “We are expecting more airlines and more passengers, and we want to be ready,” says Morales.

As part of the terminal renovations, the airport is looking at redirecting the flow of those arriving passengers who use the Cross Border Xpress. More signs will be added, for instance, to make the cross border experience even more seamless.

Because of the CBX, TIJ officials are expecting more business and tourism. “If the US and Mexico can invest in a project of this size and importance, it sends a signal to the business community that Tijuana is an attractive place for companies to invest,” Morales tells *Airways*. “CBX and TIJ are huge engines that will power development in the region.”

While the number of passengers at TIJ is steadily increasing, the number of airlines serving the airport has decreased.

A few years ago, 11 airlines operated from Tijuana; now, there are just five. However, the airport authority points out that the airlines now operating at TIJ are stronger financially.

A decade ago, there was a boom of Mexican LCCs. This wasn't sustainable and 10 airlines, many of which served Tijuana, soon went out of business; these included legacy carrier Mexicana (MX), one of the oldest airlines in the world.

While some airlines fell away, others stepped in and increased service. Volaris established a base at TIJ and is now its largest operator, with more than two-thirds of the airport's total flights.

Although the airport serves a catchment of about 3.2 million people, a cultural shift is needed to get people to choose flying over taking buses—which, in many cases, cost the same—to most of the destinations served out of TIJ. According to airport officials, for every 60

9 Aeromexico operates the Boeing 787 three times a week between Tijuana and Shanghai, with the flight originating in Mexico City.

**PHOTO: CARLOS LOPEZ**

9 Departure terminal and check-in counters at the Cross Border Xpress.

**PHOTO: AUTHOR**

10 TIJ currently has 12 gates. Additional gates will be operational when a \$61 million renovation project is completed in 2019.

**PHOTO: CARLOS LOPEZ**

people that take the bus, only one flies; thus, they see a lot of opportunity for growth.

Tijuana handles about 150 flights a day, with three traffic peaks: in the morning, between 07:00 and 09:30; in the late afternoon, between 16:00 and 19:00; and during the two hours that lead up to midnight. Despite its very close proximity to San Diego International Airport (SAN), just 23 miles (37km) away, TIJ complements, rather than competes with, the southern California airport, as it serves different destinations. However given the currency exchange, it is often cheaper for Mexicans wanting to travel to California to fly into Tijuana, cross the border, and continue their journey by intercity bus or car.

With passengers streaming in and out through the Cross Border Xpress, the prospect of more international flights, and new infrastructure on the way, Tijuana Airport is taking some big steps forward. 

#### Fast Facts

## TIJUANA

TIJ / MMTJ

**NAME:** General Abelardo L. Rodríguez International Airport

**ADDRESS:** Carretera Aeropuerto – Meza de Otay, CP22300 Tijuana, Mexico

**TELEPHONE:** +52 664 607 8200

**WEB:** www.tijuana-airport.com

**PASSENGERS:** 4,870,500 (2015)

**OPERATOR:** Grupo Aeroportuario del Pacífico

**MOVEMENTS:** 150/day approximately.

**ELEVATION:** 487ft (148.44m)

**COORDINATES:**

32°32'27"N / 116°58'12"W

**COMMUNICATIONS:**

Tower: 118.10

Ground: 119.50 / 120.30

**RUNWAY:**

09/27 9,711ft (2,960m) Paved

**DESTINATIONS:**

**DOMESTIC:** Acapulco, Aguascalientes, Cancún, Chihuahua, Ciudad Juárez, Ciudad Obregón, Colima, Culiacán, Durango, Guadalajara, Hermosillo, La Paz, León/El Bajío, Loreto, Los Mochis, Mazatlán, Mexico City, Monterrey, Morelia, Oaxaca, Puebla, Puerto Vallarta, Querétaro, San José del Cabo, San Luis Potosí, Tepic, Toluca, Torreón/Gómez Palacio, Uruapan, Veracruz, Zacatecas.

**INTERNATIONAL:** Oakland, Ontario (Cargo), Phoenix (Cargo), Shanghai.

**AIRLINES:** Aéreo Calafia, Aeromexico, Aeromexico Connect, Interjet, VivaAerobus, Volaris

**CARGO AIRLINES:** Ameriflight, Estafeta Carga Aérea, Aeronaves TSM

