

The Airport Over the Border



FROM TOP: LENNY IGHELZ/ASSOCIATED PRESS; MIKE BLAKE/REUTERS (2)



Over the Fence to the Gate
The Cross Border Xpress bridge between the U.S. and Mexico, above, allows travelers from San Diego to reach Tijuana's airport seamlessly. Travelers, left, head to U.S. Customs and Border Protection to enter the U.S. on the bridge. A plaque, below, marks where the two nations meet.



A bridge lets fliers go between San Diego and Tijuana's airport for cheaper fares, more flights

BY SCOTT McCARTNEY

San Diego

While politicians debate a longer wall at the U.S.-Mexico border, entrepreneurs have built something else entirely: a \$120 million bridge facility to speed up border crossings for air travelers.

The Cross Border Xpress is a 390-foot-long, glass-enclosed span over the barbed-wire fence here that separates Southern California from Tijuana International Airport, which sits just a few feet south of the border. The goal is to let U.S. travelers walk from San Diego to the Tijuana airport, where they can fly to other Mexican and international destinations. Tijuana has a direct flight to Shanghai, for example. San Diego doesn't.

The bridge, which opened in December,

marks the latest effort by U.S. Customs and Border Protection to keep up with the surge of international travel by using private money to expand at a time of small federal budget increases. Airports are paying for additional officers to screen fliers themselves. The government of Abu Dhabi funded a facility to handle screening in the United Arab Emirates so travelers to the U.S. can have passport and customs checks before takeoff and avoid long lines after landing.

"It's really paying dividends," CBP deputy commissioner Kevin McAleenan says of the bridge.

The facility, paid for by Mexican and American investors, including real-estate magnate Sam Zell, appears to be reducing congestion at the overcrowded border checkpoints in San Diego and actually increasing security, says Joe Misenhelter, CBP's local assistant port director. The bridge gives CBP a new high-tech facility and additional agents, and improves screening at other checkpoints by reducing the crowds a bit.

Tijuana's airport has room to grow and sits just over 20 miles from the very crowded airport in San Diego, which has one runway.

Airlines say the bridge is already sparking new travel. Volaris and Aeromexico are adding flights from Tijuana to attract Southern Californians. In May, Aeromexico will add flights to Cabo San Lucas and Chihuahua, advertising them in San Diego and Orange County, south of Los Angeles. The airline has set up exclusive parking for elite customers of SkyTeam, an international airline alliance, and a premium-customer lounge at the bridge facility. It is flying its new 787 Dreamliners between Tijuana and Mexico City to entice U.S. travelers.

"This project is changing the way people travel," says Jorge Goytortua, Aeromexico's senior vice president of global sales.

The CBX looks like an airport terminal and can only be used by air passengers. The company that built it and pays for CBP officers says early traffic has already been so strong,

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at about 2,400 people a day and 5,000 on holidays, that construction will soon begin on additional parking.

Fliers leaving San Diego simply show their boarding passes and bridge tickets, then walk straight into duty-free shopping that leads to the bridge itself. On the other side is a Mexican immigration checkpoint that opens to the Tijuana airport terminal lobby.

THE MIDDLE SEAT

For years, U.S. travelers in the San Diego area have taken advantage of cheap fares and direct flights from Tijuana to Mexican beaches and cities. As many as half of Tijuana's 4.8 million passengers a year cross the border into the U.S. at the start or end of their trip, airport and airline officials say. But entering California has always been a hassle. Fliers typically take a cab to either the San Ysidro or Otay Mesa border crossings, the two busiest in the world, according to CBP, and walk through.

Greg Lemke of La Jolla, Calif., a professor at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, uses Tijuana's airport several times a year for trips to Mérida on the Yucatán Peninsula, where he has a property he is renovating. Until the bridge opened in December, he would park



Cross Border Xpress resembles a typical new airport terminal. But it's a bridge in San Diego that speeds travelers to Tijuana International Airport.

on the U.S. side, walk across and take a cab to the Tijuana airport. The worst part was the return, with long lines to get back across the border. His alternative was flying United Airlines out of San Diego and connecting in Houston to Mérida.

"This setup is a much more convenient operation," he says, since border-crossing lines are limited to fliers.

For the past decade or more, officials on both sides of the border have considered options to route passengers through Tijuana International Airport. In 2007, investment group Otay Tijuana Venture LLC bought 55 acres of vacant land in an industrial park on the

U.S. side of the border across from the airport and began seeking approval from both governments for a passenger bridge.

The bridge charges \$12 per flier each way (\$40 for families up to six people). If traffic builds, CBX has big plans for development: a multistory parking garage, two hotels, some retail and a gas station, says chief commercial officer Elizabeth Brown.

"We're starting to see lots of Americans going down to Baja. They are surfers or have time-shares down there. And we're also starting to see a lot of business travelers," she says.

Travelers have complained on

social media and in interviews about parking. A large area of the surface lot is set up for short-term parking and is often relatively empty, while long-term parking, which has cheaper rates, is full. Sometimes payment machines haven't worked. Getting out of the lot at peak hours when multiple flights unload can be slow.

Ms. Brown says CBX is working on the problems: "There were growing pains when we opened. We really need more parking."

Construction began in 2014 and was complicated by the border—workers couldn't cross it, and agents from both sides were watching. So the bridge was built

in six sections, four on the U.S. side and two on the Mexican side. When it came time to join in the middle, the two countries agreed to temporarily move the border 10 feet so workers wouldn't be straddling the boundary and have to go through required inspection each time they moved.

Glass panels inside the bridge are frosted so you can't see CBP activities below on the border. A plaque marks the actual boundary.

Even simple airport tasks can be difficult, such as using luggage carts. Fliers have to take their luggage over the bridge, so many people want carts. But if that equipment crosses the border, it has

either been imported or exported. Porters collect carts at either end of the bridge.

San Diego's airport says it hasn't seen a drop in traffic because of the bridge. Tijuana's airport, which has 23 gates, five baggage carousels and gleaming granite floors, says business is booming. Tijuana is undertaking a \$150 million expansion and renovation over the next five years, says Guillermo Villalba Morales, director of the airport. Passenger traffic in December was up 30% from December 2014.

After being under fire for four-hour lines at big U.S. airports, CBP has dramatically improved passport-control processing in recent years by expanding trusted traveler programs, deploying new technology and turning to private funding. "They've made it easier for legitimate travelers to come to the U.S. with things like the Tijuana bridge," says Roger Dow, chief executive of the U.S. Travel Association, a Washington, D.C., trade group that blasted CBP in years past for long lines.

Entering the U.S. with his wife and son through the bridge was easier than getting through most big international airports, says Tim Klan, owner of an Erie, Pa., computer business. "You have to be blind to not find your way in the Tijuana airport. Every 20 feet there were huge signs for the bridge. Within three minutes off the plane, we were at the entrance," he says.