

## TODAY'S ECONOMY

INSIGHTS & INDICATORS



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Travelers make their way along an enclosed bridge that links the U.S. to Mexico from the Cross Border Xpress building in Otay Mesa to the Tijuana International Airport. The facility lets a traveler park in the U.S. and walk across an indoor elevated walkway to a flight in Tijuana.

# Travel boom prompts border facility growth

More and more L.A.-area travelers are using CBX's bridge to Tijuana's airport

By Samantha Gowen  
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The nation's only binational airport terminal at the southern edge of San Diego County is growing thanks in good part to the thousands of Southern California travelers who use the facility.

Updates to the Cross Border Xpress, or CBX, are coming on the heels of a record number of air travelers, mostly Americans, using the terminal's enclosed 390-foot sky bridge to walk from Otay Mesa directly into Tijuana International Airport.

In September, operators of the privately owned CBX said the 6-year-old facility had surpassed the 12 million customer mark. And this year, despite pandemic-related travel restrictions, it has so far served 1.9 million travelers. In 2019, before leisure travel came to a screeching halt,

the facility recorded 2.9 million travelers.

The first phase of the expansion should be complete by mid-November, just a week after Joe Biden's administration will ease restrictions at land borders Nov. 8 to vaccinated travelers. Border crossings during the pandemic have been limited to essential travelers and Americans.

CBX updates include adding more room for customs agents and improving traveler flow in and out of the multimillion-dollar complex. A \$100 million expansion at TIJ is adding a new wing for international flights and ultimately will reconfigure how CBX customers enter the airport. Outside of CBX in Otay Mesa, the owners are considering a parking structure and have entitlements from the county for future hotels, gas stations and retail spaces.

The Tijuana airport has been



CBX

Jorge Goytortua is the chief executive of the Cross Border Xpress in Otay Mesa. The facility, which speeds travel through the Tijuana International Airport, is getting several upgrades.

particularly popular this year as travel-starved Americans made their way to Mexican beach cities such as Cabo San Lucas and Puerto Vallarta. The airport flies to 35 destinations in Mexico, with an average 80 flights in and out of the airport daily.

### MORE ABOUT CBX

**Owner:** Otay-Tijuana Venture LLC, a U.S.-Mexican group of companies

**Tickets:** Seasonally priced, they range from \$16-\$19 to cross one-way. Round-trip tickets range from \$32 to \$34. Group tickets at discounted rates are available.

**Parking:** Prices on-site start at \$15 daily.

**Address:** 2745 Otay Pacific Drive in Otay Mesa

**Airlines at TIJ:** AeroMexico, Volaris, Calafia and Viva Aerobus

"The traffic has been really, really good for us," said CBX CEO Jorge Goytortua, who is leading the facility's expansion.

So why make the drive to the border just for a flight? The 100-mile trip from Orange County to Otay Mesa can save travel-



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The Cross Border Xpress n Otay Mesa along the border with Mexico in southern San Diego County is undergoing a major renovation to expand services for travelers.

## CBX

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ers potentially hundreds of dollars on international airfares that are technically domestic flights out of Tijuana. For example, fares in late spring from TIJ to Cabo start as low as \$72 round trip. From LAX, the fare starts around \$240.

Goytortua said more than half of the American outflow to Mexico is coming from the Los Angeles metro area with 54% of CBX users hailing from Orange County, the Inland Empire and L.A. County. Just 26% of CBX traffic comes from San Diego County, and the remaining 20% includes travelers from Mexico, Arizona and Nevada.

“It’s easier to drive south than to drive the 405,” he said, laughing, in a phone interview recently.

He credits airport authorities and Mexico’s destination cities for working hard to make travelers feel safe in Mexico amid the pandemic.

We asked Goytortua to share more about the CBX expansion and what’s ahead for the terminal and the airport.

**Q** So traffic has been good despite the pandemic. The border opening should make it even better, right?

**A** We are really pleased that this decision was made to open the border. It’s the right time to give additionally to the economy of Southern California and Mexico. As you know, Mexico has not been closed at all (to travelers), but here at CBX, we were missing the Mexican travelers who wanted to come to the U.S.

This year, we’ve recov-

ered all our previous travel at CBX (from 2020 losses) as May, June and July surpassed 2019 numbers.

So the border opening will come just in time with the expansion, complementing the traffic.

**Q** Why do people choose CBX and TIJ to travel south?

**A** The airlines have done a great job putting more capacity in the Tijuana market to the leisure destinations. Short flights; good prices. All of that really helped to drive the traffic back.

And of course, I believe that this also was recognition that Tijuana and CBX are great alternatives.

We’re two years ahead of our initial expectations for traveler traffic. Basically, the better proof is just having more and more flights leaving out of Tijuana airport.

**Q** How is CBX growing to accommodate all these travelers?

**A** We’re doubling the footprint into a multilevel facility with the airport.

Goytortua notes that in the first phase, CBX is expanding 6,945 square feet by adding four additional double-stacked immigration booths on the U.S. side to enable custom officers to process passengers and reduce waiting times. That should be ready by Nov. 15.

The bridge that travelers use to and from the airport also will change, he says.

Currently, when you cross the bridge into the airport, you go downstairs for immigration and customs. With the next expansion, travelers will continue heading east, meeting Mexican immigration/customs at the bridge level. You drop checked-in lug-

gage there before descending to the airport.

Also, besides the infrastructure investment, we’ve also been adding technology. We’ve implemented biometric facial comparison which has simplified the arrival system. With these biometrical systems, it allows the customs officer to really expedite the process for the passengers. It’s a hands-free process that increases the accuracy of the process by 97%.

**Q** What’s the plan for travel at TIJ in the not-too-distant future?

**A** So, this new building (at TIJ) is targeting new airlines and hopefully recovering the China flight TIJ previously had. We used to have that flight before COVID hit.

Now we’re trying to achieve the ability of travelers going through CBX to this new building — and if the Mexican authorities approve — they’ll be able to take their flight to China ... and skip customs in Mexico.

**Q** How would flying to China be a huge boom for CBX?

**A** The San Diego airport is not a 24-hour airport and it doesn’t have the runway for these long-haul flights to China. Those limitations mean it could be perfectly complemented by CBX and Tijuana with this type of flight. We believe that Tijuana could be the gateway for Asia flights.

**Q** What does CBX expect in the years ahead?

**A** Our goal is by 2035 to reach 7 million users annually and have all of these construction projects completed.