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TIA adds destinations, more nonstop flights

Fewer reasons to drive to Phoenix airport

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More Tucsonans are flying out of Tucson International Airport because there are more incoming and departing flights to more destinations - many of them nonstop or direct flights.

Fares in and out of TIA are also comparable with flying from Phoenix once travel costs and parking expenses at Sky Harbor International Airport are figured in.

"Tucson International Airport has grown up," Jack Camper, president of the Tucson Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, said Wednesday.

TIA offers 28 nonstop flights a day compared with 15 in 2002. Passenger totals increased to 4.22 million last year, up from 3.47 million in 1998, said Paula Winn, director of community relations for TIA.

Weekly departures have increased steadily since 2000, when 398 commercial flights took off from TIA. Last year, weekly departures increased to 492.

JetBlue now flies out of TIA and offers daily nonstop service to and from New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport.

Delta Air Lines will add two daily nonstops to Los Angeles International Airport, starting Dec. 17.

ExpressJet plans three new non-stop daily flights to Reno, Nev.; Spokane, Wash.; and Omaha, Neb., starting Nov. 11.

And Southwest Airlines has added a nonstop flight to Oakland, Calif., and an additional flight to San Diego.

Another reason for the increase in activity in recent years is that major carriers have introduced smaller aircraft as an economy move, so more flights are needed to meet demand.

"In 2000, TIA had 96 percent large jets," said Alex Kovach, director of air service research and development at the Tucson Airport Authority.

"Although we have more total departures (now), some of the aircraft are 50- and 70-seaters," he said.

"That brings the seat count per departure from an average of 136 per departure in 2000 to about 100 today."

But large airliners still account for about 70 percent of operations at TIA, Kovach said.

TIA hopes to persuade major carriers to bring more of the big planes back, in anticipation of continued increases in passenger numbers in coming years, Kovach said.

And to do so, TIA needs to grow.

One thing most travelers remember about their trips to different cities are the airports they went through, either on vacation or on business.

Was time in the airport a pleasant experience? Or was it a big contributor to the trip from hell?

For Cleveland visitor John Krayka, TIA is almost an oasis.

"It is very good compared to other airports," Krayka said.

Comments such as his are what airport officials had in mind when drafting improvements.

Tucson business leaders agree.

"More and more, the airport represents the first and last memories created for travelers to a destination," Jonathan Walker, president and CEO of the Metropolitan Tucson Convention & Visitors Bureau, said Wednesday.

"It is monumentally important that a community, especially one receiving as many visitors as Tucson, have an effective, clean, accommodating and easy-to-use airport," Walker said.

That's what TIA officials were after when they started expansion and renovation of the airport several years ago, Winn said.

The airport has a 20-year master plan that includes expanding runways and a new, federally approved and funded air traffic control tower. Neither project will get under way until at least 2009.

One recent major change was the creation of three conference rooms available for businesses and the public.

Nearby Raytheon Missile Systems uses the conference rooms for convenient meetings with visiting customers and government officials.

Another change was the installation of Wi-Fi stations to allow wireless Internet access in the terminal, Winn said.

About 600 more parking spaces were added when in August the second floor of a three-floor garage, built in 2002, was opened.

A new moving walkway leads to the garage.

Expansion and renovation of the concourses are expected to be completed in 2008. They will include new carpeting and seating, state-of-the-art flight data terminals and artwork by local artists.

The renovations include a new international arrivals area inside the main terminal, Winn said. Until that is completed later this year, international passengers will continue to deplane to a separate terminal.

Post-9/11 security concerns prompted TIA officials to move the greeting areas for family and friends of arriving passengers to the baggage claim area, Winn said.

Those meeting passengers wait in small, loungelike spaces where they can scan large closed-circuit monitors for familiar faces coming down the deplaning ramp into the main terminal and baggage areas.

"The public really has no reason to be up there," Winn said. Besides adding to security concerns, people waiting for visitors to deplane clog the area.

If you're worried about last-minute delays while waiting for a flight, you can check its status on nearby screens and decide whether you have time for another cup of coffee.

Just don't expect java from a corporate chain. The new coffee franchise at the airport was awarded to Ike's Coffee and Tea.

"Ike's is locally owned," Winn said.