

YXX greets international arrivals

The first inbound international plane landed in Abbotsford this week; a lofty symbol of the airport's rapid growth since it opened for commercial business a decade ago.

MARGARET JETELINA
special to the post

The local Abby airport has the "international" distinction in its name—Abbotsford International Airport (YXX)—but its only claim to actual international business was flights out of Canada. Few international airlines initially had Abbotsford International Airport on its radar. It wasn't until this week that a flight from an international destination landed on YXX's welcoming tarmac.

One-hundred and sixty passengers landed on an Aero Mexico flight from Mexico City Tuesday. Sandy Blue, business development manager with YXX, says the landing went off smoothly. "We rolled out the welcome mat for them—quite literally," she says. "We really made the effort to make this happen; there was lots of behind-the-scenes work to handle."

Blue says that Aero Mexico had first contacted them earlier in the year with questions about runway length and similar logistics, but then didn't hear anything again until package



Aero Mexico flight 6493 passengers disembark at Abbotsford International Airport Tuesday. They are the first internationals to arrive here on a direct, international inbound flight.

holiday company Sunwing Vacations called last Friday, asking about running Cancun flights on Fridays starting in December.

"That discussion took place on Friday, then on Saturday, Aero Mexico, which is their carrier, called to ask if we could handle a 757 charter the following Tuesday," says Blue.

Three days later, after lots of preparation, including getting Canada Customs to come in to clear the 160 Mexican tourists, the Aero Mexico flight landed to much fanfare, including an enthusiastic welcome from Tourism Abbotsford staff, who brought brochures, maps and Canadian flags for the new arrivals.

The travellers then left on charter buses for a trip from Victoria to Banff and Jasper.

"This could have been a one-off, but I spoke with a representative from Aero Mexico who said they are looking forward to coming again," says Blue.

"There are a couple of tiny things to work out, but overall they said it was a complete pleasure and so convenient. This shows that we're able to do it."

Not bad for a little airport that only opened for commercial business 10 years ago, in 1997. In the decade since, the airport has become a travelling secret of many local businesspeople and travellers from Hope to Coquitlam, who prefer the convenient, friendly travel options offered here as compared to the busy and far-away Vancouver International Airport.

"It is evident that more people are becoming aware of the convenience and ease of flying out of YXX," said Dave Kandal, chairman of the Abbotsford Airport Authority, in April. "If travellers can use an airport closer to their office or home they clearly prefer to do so. When you look at the location of Abbotsford, compare our driving distance, low traffic congestion and inexpensive parking, it makes perfect sense that more passengers are flying from here. You can truly get anywhere from here and if it's easier, why would you travel from a bigger, busier airport?"

The airport celebrated a record 502,634 passengers in 2006, up 28 per cent from the previous year. And the momentum just continues to build.

"Traffic this year so far is up 15 per cent," says Blue. "We've also been in constant talks with WestJet, which will likely offer some additional destinations soon, although there is nothing to announce yet but we're going to see



Photos | **Craig Carmichael**

An Aero Mexico jet from Mexico City lands at Abbotsford International Airport Tuesday with its 160 Mexican tourists onboard. It is the first inbound international flight to land here.

continued growth."

WestJet Airlines, of course, is a big part of YXX's business. This summer, WestJet has a total of 49 flights per week flying out of the airport.

"With two daily non-stop flights to Edmonton and five to Calgary, we are pleased to provide the Lower Mainland area with access to our entire network, including Toronto," according to Bob Cummings, executive vice-president, guest experience and marketing at WestJet.

Blue says YXX is also communicating with American-based airlines about the opportunities available here.

What exactly are the benefits for international carriers to land in Abbotsford versus Vancouver?

"There are lower fees and it's less congested here. They can land and taxi in just a few minutes," says Blue. "In Vancouver, if it could even accommodate them, the plane might have to taxi longer, burning fuel, and it would take longer to get through customs."

She says it only took 20 minutes for the first Aero Mexico passenger to get off the plane and get through customs.

"If [an airline] has happy passengers, it helps."

That efficiency gave the Mexican tourists more time to browse the little terminal, including its

recently added souvenir and snack shop.

"These Mexicans loved to shop. They bought out pretty much everything," chuckles Blue, adding. "Today was evidence that we can do this. The airport was bustling and was a vision into the kind of growth that the airport will see."

The Abbotsford Airport Authority is planning to make further enhancements to the terminal, including more food and shopping choices. The authority is approaching the federal and provincial governments for help with expansion, and is working on getting U.S. pre-clearance for Canadians flying to the United States.

"We're also focusing on flights to India because we have one of the largest South Asian populations outside India," says Blue. "Everything is about relationship building. Things move a little bit slowly sometime, but we're really quite hopeful that we'll make some announcements not too long away."

Blue adds that new growth and expansion won't tarnish the airport's reputation as a friendly, welcoming place, so Abby airport regulars need not worry.

"It's in our best interests to keep that spirit alive through any expansion."

Seems like Aero Mexico and its passengers were pleased enough. It has confirmed another flight into Abbotsford for July 31.

History: Abby airport has come a long way



• **1940-1942:** The Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) purchased land to build the Abbotsford Airport.

• **1943:** Construction of the airport was completed consisting of three runways 5,100 feet long by 200 feet wide.

• **1943:** Under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, the No. 24 Elementary Flying Training School started operations. Then #5 Liberator Operational Training Unit was based here.

• **1946:** The RCAF station at Abbotsford Airport closed in 1946, although RCAF stayed on as a caretaker.

• **1948:** When the Fraser River flooded, people and animals from Matsqui moved to the airport barracks.

• **1952:** The airport was closed from 1952 to 1958.

• **1956-1957:** Citizenship and Immigration Canada used the airport to house 3,000 Hungarian refugees.

• **1958:** The airport was officially transferred to Transport Canada. Runway 07-25

was extended by 1,900 feet to 7,000 feet in length.

• **1960:** A control tower began operations on a part-time basis to handle IFR (instrument flight rules) traffic that was diverted to Abbotsford when Vancouver International Airport was closed because of fog. With the increase in traffic, the tower began full-time operation in December 1961.

• **1962:** The first Abbotsford Air Show was held.

• **1963:** Runway 07-25 was extended by another 1,000 feet to 8,000 feet.

• **1966:** Skyway Air Services was granted permission to use the airport for a gliding school.

• **1981:** A new control tower was commissioned.

• **1986:** Airspeed Aviation began operation.

• **1997:** On January 1, ownership of the airport was officially transferred from Transport Canada to the City of Abbotsford. On June 18, WestJet Airlines took its inaugural flight.

• **1998:** The new terminal building was opened on December 10 and expanded in

2002 and in 2004.

• **2002:** The customs building was constructed in 2002 and expanded in 2005.

• **2005:** Runway 07-25 was extended to 9,600 feet.

• **2006:** YXX surpassed 500,000 passengers for the year.

• **2007:** New snack and souvenir shop opens in terminal.

• **2007:** First inbound international flight by Aero Mexico.

• **45th year for Abbotsford Airshow**

This Aug. 10-12, the Abbotsford International Airshow is back for its 45th year.

As usual, the airshow will feature fantastic in-air feats by a variety of aircraft, including military performers, like Canadian Forces Snowbirds to warbirds like a P-51 Mustang.

There will also be various static displays of aircraft such as a U.S. Air Force F-117 Night-hawk and a U.S. Navy F/A-18 Super Hornet.

Tickets are \$25 per adult; \$10 for children six to 12. For more information, see www.abbotsfordairshow.com.