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Migrants filling discount border-hop flights

Airlines cashing in on U.S.-bound crossers

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MEXICALI, Mexico - Among travelers, it's jokingly known as Aeromigrante - Migrant Air.

New discount airlines in Mexico are doing a brisk business shuttling migrants to the U.S. border, turning what was once a days-long trek into an easy hop for legions of workers, both legal and illegal.

"It's much more comfortable than the bus and about the same price," said Leopoldo Torres, 37, of Mexico City, as he stretched his legs aboard Volaris Flight 190 to the border city of Mexicali.

He and a traveling companion, Julio Menéndez, paid \$118 each for the three-hour flight. They planned to cross into the United States illegally through the California desert.

Such migrants have become bread-and-butter customers for airlines Volaris, Avolar, Alma, Viva Aerobus, Interjet and Click, all of which have started up in the past two years. Older carriers such as Aero California and Aviaca have cut their own prices to compete.

"The most productive routes we have are cities where you have those passengers who are traveling with the idea of the American Dream," said Luis Ceceña, a spokesman for Avolar. About 70 percent of Avolar's passengers are migrants, he said.

For some airlines like Avolar, the emphasis on migrant travel was a conscious decision, with company officials structuring their routes and fares around migrants' needs, he said. For others, it was simply a side effect of low prices, which have opened up air travel to millions of poorer Mexicans.

The airlines say they treat migrants like any other passengers. The Mexican government has promised to try to slow emigration by creating jobs in Mexico. But by law, Mexican authorities and companies cannot impede the free travel of their fellow citizens, even if they suspect they are going to cross the U.S. border illegally.

Heading for the desert

Travelers planning to cross illegally are easy to spot. At the Hermosillo airport, a major crossroads for migrants headed to the Arizona desert, they are the men traveling in groups of three and four, wearing new sneakers or

hiking boots and carrying nothing but backpacks.

"Altar! Naco! Nogales!" taxi dispatcher Javier Montaña shouted outside the airport as he directed travelers to vans headed to the main staging grounds for illegal border crossers.

Because of the increased traffic, Mexican immigration agents now check the IDs of all arriving passengers, even on domestic flights, to try to catch Central American migrants headed to the border. In Hermosillo, federal police conduct spot checks on the vans before they leave the airport.

"By law, we can't stop the Mexican (migrants)," police Officer Carlos Zequera Arias said. "But the Central Americans are starting to get on these flights, too."

Falling prices

Until the flood of discount airlines began in 2005, air travel in Mexico was too expensive for most poor Mexicans. A one-way flight from central Mexico to Tijuana ran \$300 or more on the country's two flag carriers, Aeromexico and Mexicana.

For most migrants, getting to the border meant days of travel on long-distance buses - or for the very poor, a harrowing and illegal ride on Mexico's railways while clinging to a freight car.

The discount airlines cut costs by copying the business model of U.S. carrier Southwest Airlines. They fly out of smaller airports, make several stops on the same trip, bypass travel-agent fees by selling directly to customers, and concentrate on a few high-volume routes instead of a hub-and-spoke system.

Typical fares to Tijuana from Toluca, just east of Mexico City, are now around \$150 on the discount airlines.

That has opened up air travel to millions of new customers, said José Calderoni, marketing director for Volaris. About one-third of the airline's passengers have never flown before, he said.

Overall, the number of Mexicans flying has jumped 36 percent since 2004. About 13.4 million people took domestic flights from January to June, according to Mexico's Institute of Statistics, Geography and Information Processing.

The discount airlines have been adding planes and routes at a breakneck pace. Avolar has grown from one jetliner and three destinations to nine with 16 destinations. Viva Aerobus has 21 destinations and plans to double its fleet to 10 jets from five. Interjet has nine planes and says it will order 20 more. Alma has 15 regional jets and 25 destinations, Volaris has 12 planes and 17 destinations, while Click has 26 destinations with 18 planes and six on order.

Migrants said one factor drawing them to airlines is the increasing difficulty of crossing the border. As the United States builds fences and adds Border Patrol agents, smugglers known as coyotes or *polleros* have raised their fees from \$1,000 to \$2,000 or more.

"So 2,000 pesos (about \$180) for a plane ticket is nothing anymore," said Guillermo Hernández of San Marcos, Guerrero state, as he arrived in Hermosillo on an Aviacsa flight. "You get here rested, and you don't have to pay for food along the way."

Some of the discount airlines' fares and routes reflect their emphasis on migrants headed north, said Ceceña of Avolar.

Avolar, for example, has direct flights to Hermosillo from three central Mexican cities but not a single flight going south. Volaris charges \$77 for a Toluca-Hermosillo flight, but only \$48 going the other direction.

"Our routes attract many people who want to cross the border. These are one-way passengers, which is hard for us because, of course, we want to sell round-trip tickets," Volaris' Calderoni said.

On the day that Torres flew to Mexicali, the 144-seat Volaris jetliner was mostly full. On the return trip a week later, there were only 31 passengers.

The migrant trade is also seasonal, Calderoni said. Most migrants go north in the cooler months, when crossing the desert is easier. Southbound travel increases during the Christmas season, when many migrants come home with gifts and money.

The airlines say they are trying to get even more migrant business. Avolar is offering Greyhound bus connections from Tijuana to Fresno, Calif., where many migrants work on farms. Aero California takes payments through Western Union, used by many migrants to send money home. Volaris says it will launch a regional advertising campaign focusing on smaller towns, where many migrants come from.

"People can say what they want, Migrant Air or whatever," Ceceña said. "But we have a saying in Mexico, 'Let the other hens cackle; you take care of your own eggs.' It's a good business for us, and we're going to keep taking care of those customers."