

# Big Plans, High Hopes For Los Cabos Airport

New screening equipment and a shuttle to La Paz in the works

by Susy Buchanan

The Los Cabos airport has grown enormously over the years, and continues to expand and update its facilities even though last year did see a decline in passengers, says airport director Martin Zazueta.

"When our northern neighbors get a cold we get pneumonia down here," Zazueta says. As if bad press about crime, and the economic downturn weren't enough, by the time H1N1 hit in May things were very, very tough. "Not even after September 11, 2001 did we suffer as much as we did last year," Zazueta says. Between December of 2008 and December of 2009 the number of passengers dipped by 12.4 percent.

The airport works on projections five years out, and the period from 2010 to 2014 looks hopeful. Zazueta says he's already seeing signs of recovery

"It is important to remember that we need to diversify our destination," Zazueta opines.

"That means creating options that are affordable for all economic levels and reaching out more to Mexican tourism, which was very important in keeping us afloat during the roughest patches of last year." Managed by Grupo Aeroportuario del Pacifico (GAP), a company that operates 12 airports along Mexico's Pacific coast, this year will see more than \$16 million in improvements.

A good portion of that money will go toward installing new, state-of-the-art screening equipment which will eliminate the need for human employees rifling through your bags as you approach the ticket counter. Construction will also resume on Terminal Four, which will basically double the size of the airport. In order to boost tourism to La Paz, which currently only has one flight a week from the United States, starting this month a luxury shuttle bus will take passengers from the Los Cabos airport to La Paz for a fee of \$26.

Last year also saw the airport build a new terminal for private planes, which make up 35 percent of all arriving flights in Los Cabos. Already in 2010 the number of arrivals of private aircraft are up from last year. "The rich are the first to get back on their feet," Zazueta says. The old private terminal is now used as an office building for airport management and overflow for private planes during holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas.

One long term concern Zazueta and others have been very vocal about is the eventual need to expand the runways at the airport. Flight arrivals and departures are scheduled around check in and check out times at hotels. If the airport is saturated with flights between certain hours tourists may opt for other destinations rather than arrive at odd hours. The trouble with the expansion is that a colony of squatters has moved in on the land where the new runway would be built

and are demanding electricity and water. Should they be granted utilities, it will be impossible to get them to leave, Zazueta argues. The issue of whether or not to relocate the barrio is in the hands of politicians.

"There is no other industry here besides tourism," Zazueta points out. Ninety percent of our visitors come through this airport and we have the potential for exponential growth," Zazueta says. "The squatters are like having someone come build a home on your patio. "I hope we can stop thinking about this as a political issue and start thinking in terms of our future."