

# Bellingham airport welcomes B.C. flyers (with video)

## Passengers flocking south of border for cheaper airfares

BY IAN AUSTIN AND ELAINE O'CONNOR, THE PROVINCE    OCTOBER 4, 2012

Bellingham, Wash., is so bullish on Canadian air travel that it's tripling the size of its terminal.

With nearly two out of three Bellingham passengers hailing from Canada, a new 100,000-square-foot terminal is under construction that will dwarf the present 27,000-sq.-ft facility.

Dean Zenk, director of aviation for the Port of Bellingham, says it's simple math - Canadians can save money by driving across the border and flying from U.S. airports.

"A recent study found that 62 per cent of the passengers coming out of Bellingham are Canadian," said Zenk, who wasn't surprised when told that a Conference Board of Canada study found five million Canadians cross the border each year to hop on cheaper U.S. flights.

"The fees are lower. It's particularly the international fees."

The growing Bellingham airport is bringing prosperity along with an ever-growing bucketful of loonies - the airport's 10-year plan calls for the 2011 total of 511,000 outbound passengers to grow to 800,000 by 2021.

The conference board study found that government policy changes might convince two million of those passengers to fly from Canada next time around.

"I'm always concerned about that," said Zenk. "This is a very dynamic industry, with airlines constantly coming off destinations or adding new destinations."

Within the travel and airline sectors, the consensus is federal fees and surcharges are strangling the Canadian travel industry.

"Something needs to happen. There needs to be the recognition that five million people are deciding to drive because it is too expensive to fly here ... and so much of that is taxes and surcharges and user-fees and security charges," said Marc-André O'Rourke, director of the National Airlines Council of Canada, which represents the country's four largest airlines, Air Canada, Jazz, West-Jet and Air Transat.

Depending on destination, third-party surcharges could make up to an estimated 40 per cent of ticket costs in Canada, he said.

O'Rourke pointed out that U.S. border airports are also heavily marketed to Canadians. The Plattsburgh, N.Y., airport, which is an hour from Montreal, has dubbed itself the "Montreal South" airport and parts of its website are in French.

Bellingham, O'Rourke said, was also a "huge" drain on Canadian passengers.

Vancouver airport's Alisa Gloag said in an email that such competition was inevitable.

"Passengers have choices when selecting airlines and airports," she said. "We know that we will not always be able to compete on cost with airports south of the border. We also know that YVR customers appreciate the convenience of a local airport and the superior passenger experience we provide."

Passengers at YVR on Wednesday said they'll usually trade convenience for savings.

Bethany Henzel of White Rock chose YVR on Tuesday - even though Bellingham is just across the border from her home. "It's close to the border, but it's more of a hassle," Henzel said as she prepared to board a flight to Arizona.

Joan Johnson and Marlyn Hill were bound for Las Vegas on Wednesday - but starting from Victoria they first have to "get off the rock" (Vancouver Island), so Vancouver makes more sense.

Hill said she flew out of Seattle to save money on a trip to Florida, but usually sticks to Vancouver.

#### **AVERAGE FARES FROM B.C. AIRPORTS AND THEIR CROSS-BORDER COMPETITOR**

Vancouver (YVR) Bellingham (BLI) Abbotsford (YYZ)

##### **Base**

YVR: \$388

BLI: \$269

YYZ: \$318

##### **Fees and taxes**

YVR: \$105

BLI: \$38

YYZ: \$114

##### **Total**

YVR: \$493

BLI: \$30

YYZ: \$432

*Note: Comparison based on samples of lowest fares available to common U.S. destinations. Source: Canadian Airports Council*

#### **AIRLINE FARE COMPARISON**

Travel dates: Oct. 17 to Oct. 24 . Ticket: One adult

Departure: Anytime . Price: Cheapest available

Search engine: Kayak.com

#### **HONOLULU**

##### **VANCOUVER TO HONOLULU**

Price: \$507 total with taxes

Airline: Alaska Airlines

Route: Vancouver > Seattle > Honolulu

##### **BELLINGHAM TO HONOLULU**

Price: \$317 total with taxes

Airline: Alaska Airlines

Route: Direct flight

**ABBOTSFORD TO HONOLULU**

Price: \$780 total with taxes

Airlines: WestJet / Alaska Airlines

Route: Calgary > Seattle > Honolulu

**LAS VEGAS**

Vancouver to Las Vegas Price: \$306 total with taxes

Airlines: US Airways / Alaska Airlines

Route: Seattle > Las Vegas

Bellingham to Las Vegas Price: \$228 total with taxes

Airline: Alaska Airlines

Route: Direct

Abbotsford to Las Vegas Price: \$641 total with taxes

Airlines: WestJet / Alaska

Route: Calgary > Seattle > Las Vegas

Return: Calgary > Vancouver

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