



Photograph by V. T. Polywoda, via Flickr.



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Old Border

New connection?

Not long ago, I found myself on the beach in Tijuana, among picnicking families, popsicle vendors, and roving minstrels. The beach looked like many in Southern California, except for one surreal detail: a tall, metal fence—the border fence—running across the sand, over the tideline, and straight into the plunging surf. Several people gazed through gaps in the fence toward the shimmering high rises of San Diego. But nobody on the US side appeared to be looking back. The scene reminded me of an observation writer Richard Rodriguez made years ago about the area: “San Diego faces west, looks resolutely out to sea. Tijuana stares north, as toward the future.”

That idea—that Mexicans look northward to a world that’s indifferent to them at best, and hostile at worst—is reinforced by the towering border fence, the ultimate symbol of divisiveness. Yet those of us who love the border region and believe its diversity is more of an asset than a liability are always looking for new symbols of interconnectedness—and of changing times.

We may have one in an innovative new development less than ten miles inland. A sleek, new pedestrian bridge opened in December 2015, linking the United States with the Tijuana International Airport. Called the Cross Border Xpress, the facility allows American travelers who are flying out of Tijuana to park on US soil, check in for their flights, and walk directly over the border fence and into the Tijuana terminal. Conversely, travelers flying into Tijuana International can enter the United States via the bridge, avoiding potentially hours-long waits at other border crossings. The cost to cross each way is \$12.

Built by private investors for \$120 million, the bridge is staffed by US Customs and Border Protection personnel who maintain the same security levels as other US airports and international crossings. The crossing is open only to travelers who are

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Photograph by David Harrison.

carrying a boarding pass for a flight that departs within twenty-four hours. The facility includes airline check-in desks, an arrivals area served by taxis and Uber, and a duty-free store. A sports bar is due to open in late 2016 or early 2017. In other words, Cross Border Xpress is a lot like other US airports, except the runway is in Mexico.

San Diego officials have been looking to expand the city's airport capacity for years. The bridge helps, giving travelers in San Diego unprecedented access to dozens of destinations served by Tijuana's airport—thirty-three Mexican cities in all, as well as Shanghai, which is served by three flights weekly. In fact, developers estimate that eventually more than 2 million air travelers will use the bridge annually.

The 390-foot metallic-purple bridge and the adjacent structures—designed by Stantec and the late Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta—are clean and modern but unlikely to inspire awe. Arriving travelers will find a courtyard, reflecting pool, and a smattering of palm trees and agave. Two spacious halls—one for arrivals, the other for departures—feature high, white ceilings; big, recessed orange

lights; and Mexican onyx used decoratively on windows, lights, and globes.

Aesthetics aside, something more important is going on. The bridge just might represent a shift in perceptions. Rather than looking resolutely west, San Diego may be turning toward the south, however guardedly. Sure, many US citizens remain leery of Tijuana. Border security, crime, and undocumented migrant crossings are ever-present concerns. “But in San Diego, there are now subpopulations that care a whole lot about Tijuana,” says Everard Meade, director of the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego. For starters, economic ties between the two cities are on the rise. San Diego's biotech industry is booming, and Mexican pharmaceutical production plays a critical role. In addition, half of all deported Mexicans land in Mexicali or Tijuana and many choose to stay there, leading friends and family in the United States to visit more often. And American foodies are flocking south with newfound zeal to sample celebrated Tijuana restaurants such as Misión 19 and wines produced in the Guadalupe Valley.



Photograph by David Harrison.

Attitudes south of the border are changing, too. While many in Tijuana still gaze north, others see a compelling future in Tijuana itself. One reason: wages in the city are higher than in much of Mexico. “Tijuana is booming,” Meade says. What’s more, middle-class Mexicans with tourist visas can cross into the United States as they please. At San Diego’s Fashion Valley Mall, home to Bloomingdale’s and other high-end shops, “half the people there on a Sunday are from Tijuana,” says Meade.

The bridge might even draw a few American travelers to Tijuana who wouldn’t otherwise make the trip south. “If people who’ve never crossed to Tijuana before now cross to get a flight to Cancún, maybe they’ll be a little more likely to think that crossing the border isn’t such a big deal,” says Melissa Floca, interim director of the Center for US-Mexico Studies at the University of California, San Diego. “Three months later, they might decide to go get tacos or watch a soccer match.” Tijuana’s Xolos soccer team is red hot and enjoys a devout following in San Diego.

The bridge itself could spur additional development, reshaping the border region, says John Kasarda, coauthor of *Aerotropolis: The Way We’ll Live Next*. “There may be business people who wish to reside only in the US but who have quite a bit of business throughout Mexico, and this bridge gives them quick access,” he says. “And it could draw some businesses that for some reason don’t want to be located in Mexico but want to deliver their products through Mexico or Latin America. It’s all about accessibility.”

Derrick Chinn, an American who founded the Tijuana tour company *Turista Libre* to give outsiders a fresh view of the area, believes the bridge is an apt symbol of increased openness. “Whether it’s the new interest in the gastronomic scene, the soccer team, or simply a general shift in attitudes, people are discovering Tijuana with a new mindset,” he says. Indeed, on a recent afternoon, *Cross Border Xpress* was buzzing. The bridge gleamed under blue skies, and travelers were lining up at check-in counters preparing to cross into Tijuana. They were heading south, over a fortified border fence, toward a more interconnected future. **B**