

Officials: Direct flights to Mexico show Austin's emergence

[Local](#) By [James Barragan](#) - American-Statesman Staff

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Highlights

- City officials, businesspeople say direct flights will grow ties between Mexico and Austin.
- Austin now has direct flights to Mexico's two biggest cities.
- Austin looks to become big player in Texas tourism and business with direct flights to Mexico.

Anurag Kumar travels to Mexico every four to eight weeks. Employees from his Austin-based software development firm, iTexico, travel to Guadalajara almost every week on business trips to the company's delivery center, which houses 135 of its 145 employees.

But before this summer, Kumar's travel plans were complicated and inconvenient. If he, his clients or his employees wanted to travel to the city about 300 miles northwest of Mexico City, they had to either drive to one of the bigger Texas cities — Dallas, Houston or San Antonio — to board a direct flight, or catch a flight from Austin to another airport before reaching Mexican soil.

Beginning in August, Kumar's trips to Mexico got a lot easier. Last month, Volaris, a low-cost Mexican airline, began operating a direct flight to and from Austin-Bergstrom International Airport and Guadalajara three times a week. And in mid-November, Aeromexico, Mexico's leading airline, will launch a nonstop flight between Austin and Mexico City four times a week. Austin has had a false start with direct flights to Mexico. In 2006, Aeromexico launched a direct flight to Mexico City that increased its frequency a year later before shuttering during the recession.



Rene Torrez (left) and Karime Marrufo of Volaris Airlines work on getting passengers checked in and on board Flight 873 to ... [read more](#)

But Austin businesspeople and officials say the new flights, which will ease the exchange between Austin and two of Mexico's biggest and most important financial, political and cultural cities, signal the city's growing stature on the state, national and global level.

Austin, they said, is ready to be more than a politics and academia hub and compete with other Texas cities as a tourism and business center.

"We want to play, but we want to play to win," said Mark Madrid, president and CEO of the Greater Austin Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. "Austin has the goods; it has the profile; it's a very unique place. ... We want to play with the big boys and girls and to win in that space."



ROBERT CALZADA / STAFF

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In much of Mexico, Austin's reputation remains that of a "provincial college town" near the much more popular tourist destination of San Antonio, said Carlos González Gutiérrez, consul general of Mexico in Austin.

But in cosmopolitan cities like Mexico City and Guadalajara, Austin is well-known as a cultural hub famous for international film and music festivals like Austin City Limits and South By Southwest, where the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs debuted the ["Casa Mexico" multiday event](#) last year.

"They love it," Kumar said, "The music scene, the high tech young culture and the idea of Austin as kind of an oasis in Texas. They're very familiar with it. Austin has a really good brand name." González Gutiérrez said he thinks these flights will raise Austin's profile within Mexico. Texas officials, who are keen on building on the state's trade relation with its neighbor to the south, are happy to increase the ties between its capital city and its largest trading partner.

“An increase in direct flights will only strengthen our economic ties,” Texas Secretary of State Carlos Cascos said in a statement. “These new options are good for Austin and good for the Texas-Mexico relations.”

The new flights could also attract more Mexican tourists to Austin’s [struggling Formula 1 race](#). The sport is highly popular in Mexico City, which hosts its own Formula 1 race, and Guadalajara, which is the birthplace of Sergio “Checo” Pérez, a popular Mexican F1 driver. Likewise, the flights also open up new destinations to Austin travelers who could soon fly directly to Mexico’s capital city and can now fly to Guadalajara, which is famous for mariachi, tequila and an international book festival.

“The direct flights to Guadalajara and Mexico City are reflective of increasing ties and relationships that are happening already and they can’t do anything but expand,” said Austin Mayor Steve Adler. “It says to me there’s a huge opportunity for both Austin and Mexico, and some of that opportunity is linked.”

‘Mexico’s Silicon Valley’

For decades, Guadalajara has been known as Mexico’s Silicon Valley. IBM and Motorola started operating there in the 1960s, producing semiconductors and silicon wafers in the city. Other major companies like Oracle, HP, Intel and Dell also have satellite offices there.

But recently, the city has also become a startup mecca. Since 2014, around \$120 million has been invested in about 300 startups in Guadalajara, according to a news report by [The Washington Post](#).

In finding a Mexican city mirroring Austin’s tech rise, local entrepreneurs see opportunity. Guadalajara’s many universities offer tech companies a readily available and relatively cheap talent pool that speaks English and is well-versed in American culture, unlike other places such as India and Ukraine, which offer offshore services.

“Doing business with folks in Mexico is not too different from doing business with people in Texas or California,” said Kumar. “You feel in a very familiar environment. The food, the language you hear — it makes it kind of easy to work with.”

Kumar says his operation in Guadalajara holds a leg up on outsourcing to other places because the city is in the same time zone as many of his clients, meaning workers are easily available when needed. And now, if a client in Austin wants to visit the Mexico offices, they’re only a two-hour flight away.

Since starting part of its business in Guadalajara five years ago, iTexico has grown 550 percent to \$5 million a year in revenue and has received an entrepreneurial award from the Mexican government. Austin business entrepreneurs hope others can follow iTexico’s model to success, which takes advantage of the tariff-free commerce and intellectual property protection provided by the North American Free Trade Agreement.

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Business in Mexico has been so good for Kumar that when he first met with Volaris officials about bringing a direct flight to Austin, he half-jokingly offered to buy 400 tickets upfront.

“I know Austin has had false starts with flying to Mexico, but I’m hoping this will stay,” Kumar said. “I’m not going anywhere away from Guadalajara. I’m fully committed. I need this.”