

Connecting canyons and capitals

As the closest airport to the Grand Canyon with a commercial air service, Flagstaff/Pulliam has quite the tourist attraction on its doorstep. **Thomas Haynes** travels to the Arizona facility to find out about its unique operation

With the Grand Canyon and a university with 30,000 students on its doorstep, Flagstaff Pulliam Airport (FLG) has all the ingredients of a thriving regional gateway. Situated some 150 miles north and a two- to three-hour drive from Phoenix, the facility is an important asset to the city of Flagstaff, allowing residents easy access to the state capital. For tourists, FLG is the closest airport to the Grand Canyon with a commercial air service and is currently served by American Airlines' regional brand American Eagle.

Situated to the south of the city, the facility caters for both general aviation and airline traffic. With a single runway (21/03) that spans 8,800ft in length and 150ft in width, the site is notable for its elevation, which tops 7,015ft above sea level. On summer days, the density

altitude can surpass 10,000ft, which when paired with the high terrain in the vicinity, makes it a complex environment for some aircraft.

The most common visitors to the airport are American Eagle Bombardier CRJ-700s operated by SkyWest Airlines on behalf of American Airlines. The gateway also regularly handles large civil and military types, including Boeing 757s and C-17s.

The terminal building – which opened in 1993 and is positioned at a 45° angle to the runway and single parallel taxiway – offers access to three aircraft parking stands. All the necessary facilities are present inside, including check-in desks (which number three), car rental counters (which outstrip the check-in desks), a single baggage belt, TSA security area with two lanes and a waiting room with two gates.

History

Airline flights to the airport date back to 1948, when the facility was opened. Arizona Airways launched an air service with Douglas DC-3s, but after merging with Frontier Airlines in 1950, the Convair CV-340 and CV-580 began to make appearances. During the 1950s and 1960s, air service expanded to include direct flights to Denver, Colorado via Gallup in New Mexico, Farmington, New Mexico, and >>

BELOW: *Flagstaff's single runway 21/03 measures 8,800ft in length*
FLAGSTAFF AIRPORT





LEFT: *The old terminal building at the airport*
FLAGSTAFF AIRPORT



LEFT: *The facility was opened on July 30, 1948* ALL IMAGES KEY-THOMAS HAYNES UNLESS STATED



Durango, Colorado. However, Frontier flights came to an end in 1979. During this time and through to the early 1980s, several commuter carriers played a crucial role in connecting Flagstaff primarily to Phoenix. These included Cochise Airlines, Desert Air Service, Desert Pacific Airlines, Sun West Airlines and SkyWest Airlines. Aircraft ranging from Fairchild Swearingen Metroliners and Beechcraft C99s to de Havilland Canada DHC-6 Twin Otters, Cessna 402s and Piper Navajos were a common sight at the airport during this period. American Eagle, operated by Wings West Airlines, represented American

Airlines in Flagstaff from 1986 to 1987, using Metroliners for flights to Phoenix. Meanwhile, America West Airlines made its entrance in 1987, operating De Havilland Canada DHC-8 Dash 8s. Flights to the carrier's hubs in Phoenix and Las Vegas, with the latter making a stop at Grand Canyon National Park Airport, followed. On the occasions, Flagstaff would be treated to the use of Boeing 737-200s by America West, which would fill in as a back-up for the Dash 8s. The operation was handed over to Phoenix-based Mesa Airlines in 1992, which flew Beechcraft 1900Ds and Embraer EMB120 Brasilias, flying as

BELOW: *The terminal in use today opened in 1993*

America West Express between FLG and Phoenix. By 1996, the airport saw up to 16 daily flights to the state capital, with one departing every hour. The services were upgauged to the Dash 8 in 1998. Following America West's merger with US Airways in 2007, the flights were rebranded as US Airways Express. A significant milestone for Flagstaff came in 2012, when all of its flights were upgraded to the 50-seat Bombardier CRJ-200, signifying the first time in its history that jet aircraft were regularly scheduled to serve the airport. Following the 2015 merger

of US Airways with American Airlines, American Eagle service returned to FLG. The Phoenix flights received a further upgrade in 2017, when the CRJ-200 was swapped out for the larger 70-seat CRJ-700, operated by SkyWest Airlines. During 2018, a single Saturday flight to Los Angeles was added, utilising a CRJ-700 operated by SkyWest as American Eagle. United Airlines joined the line-up in 2019, when it launched a daily flight to Denver using Embraer ERJ145s. The service ended in October 2022.

ABOVE: *In addition to airline traffic, the airport has a sizeable GA population*

Phoenix/Sky Harbor and a weekly Saturday connection to Los Angeles, which returned after a hiatus in October 2024. Despite having the Grand Canyon on its doorstep, and a thriving city of more than 70,000 residents, airport management say there's one thing that is holding them back, although it is out of their control. Brian Gall, director of Flagstaff Airport, explained: "The major challenge we're facing at the moment is the regional airline pilot shortage. The United [Denver] service here was very successful with an 83% load factor in the final year of operation and as many as three flights a day to Denver. Unfortunately, both American and United, along with our other partners

that haven't flown to Flagstaff before, have shifted a lot of their pilots to their mainline operations, where they can fly more passengers with the same number of crew, so we're feeling the effects of that." The number of American flights is slightly reduced from where it was three or four years ago but, as demonstrated by the reintroduction of the Los Angeles service, FLG is starting to see it tick back up. Gall said more than five million tourists visit the region each year, but because of the airport's proximity to Phoenix, it suffers a 78% 'leakage rate' to Sky Harbor, meaning that 78% of the people who want to arrive in Flagstaff are choosing to fly to Phoenix and then drive up. Through its 'Fly Flagstaff First' campaign, the airport is encouraging >>

Current picture

At present, American Eagle is the airport's only airline partner and offers a daily flight to Dallas/Fort Worth, four to five daily services to

BELOW: *The Bombardier CRJ-700 is the only airliner regularly scheduled to operate to and from Flagstaff*



locals to consider travelling through FLG when they're flying out. The facility's director also believes that by adding a second airline, customer choice will increase, lowering ticket prices – which are currently marginally higher than Phoenix, which is typical for regional airports compared to major US hubs. However, the author found that on a connecting international itinerary via Phoenix

beginning in London, the leg to Flagstaff made no real difference to the overall price. In a move to sweeten any possible airline deal, airport management have applied for federal funding to help with revenue and advertising support for a new air carrier at the facility. Gall said he had had conversations with "a number of different air carriers", and that he was hoping to get additional

air service "mostly to places north and northeast of Flagstaff." Around 80,000 passengers travelled through FLG during 2024. As a result of the pilot shortage and a reduction in flights, this figure is down on the all-time record of 124,000 in 2019. "I think that that's a position we could find ourselves in again very soon," admitted Gall. "I don't think it's going to take a lot of things to go our way before we start to see numbers near where we were at our peak."

Throughout its recent history, legacy carriers have dominated the airline offering at FLG, so could there be a place for a low-cost operator? Brian Gall thinks so: "In fact we've had conversations with some of them. However, some of the challenges we face are that a lot of our traffic is tourist traffic and the low cost carriers tend to fly between one and three times per week, which can make scheduling a little bit challenging. Also, in our case, being as close as we are to Phoenix/Sky Harbor, I could see some of those passengers opting to fly to Phoenix instead of coming here, but I do think that there's an opportunity for a low-cost carrier to come to a place like Flagstaff."

Another challenge for the airport that rolls around like clockwork every year is winter. The facility's positioning at high elevation means that clearing snow is a major part of daily operations during the colder months. Gall said: "We have a lot of sunny days punctuated by really intense snowfall. We might get four to six inches, maybe even up to a foot sometimes, and then some sunny days after that. Moving that volume of snow in a short period of time can be challenging. We frequently get snowfall rates that exceed two inches an hour. With the amount of



ABOVE: FedEx Feeder operates cargo flights between Phoenix/Sky Harbor and Flagstaff

pavement we have out here, keeping the equipment staffed, keeping people on top of it to stop the snow from getting too deep is the main point of emphasis for us."

With the pilot shortage impacting current operations, where does the airport director think the facility will be in a decade's time? "In ten years, I could easily see us in a position where we have an additional carrier or two, and our enplanements moving up to somewhere in the mid-100 region. That's going to trigger the need for some things like terminal expansion projects and those take some time to get off the ground. So I'm not sure if that will be done in ten years, but I could see us being pretty far on the planning stage on some of that, along with the increased amount of traffic that would entail."

With its cosy and intimate feel, FLG has everything a passenger would want. Now it just needs more flight options, which is something management are working very hard to achieve. **AVV**

RIGHT: There's no searching around for the correct baggage carousel at Flagstaff as it only has one!



RIGHT: The author's ride for the return flight to Phoenix, American Eagle CRJ-701ER, N702SK (c/n 10136), is prepared for departure



LEFT: Flagstaff's Airport Rescue Fire Fighting (ARFF) and Operations team provides 24-hour year-round coverage



LEFT: The terminal's check-in area has three counters

BELOW: Bombardier CRJ-701ER, N715SK (c/n 10179), takes off from runway 21 at Flagstaff



Flagstaff experience

The author travelled through Flagstaff to reach the Grand Canyon in early September 2024. After touching down, passengers deplane onto the tarmac and then walk the short distance to the arrivals door, which then leads straight into the baggage reclaim area. There was no searching around for the correct carousel and very minimal waiting time for the bags. The car rental counters are perfectly positioned on the other side of the room, then it's a short stroll to the car park, which is positioned about 100ft from the terminal exit door. The whole experience – which was extremely smooth – lasted no more than 20 minutes.

For the author's departure from Flagstaff, a visit was paid to the check-in desks located at the western end of the terminal. The agent manning the desk – who would later don a hi-vis vest and assume ground crew duties – explained the slightly different bag check process, which involves passengers placing their suitcases on a metal roller track and pushing them through a hole in the wall themselves. There was no queue for the TSA and, in a matter of minutes, we were in the departure lounge awaiting the aircraft's arrival. Once the aircraft had parked, the large windows offered a front row seat to watch all aspects of the turnaround at close range. It was even possible to spot our bags being loaded on the aircraft. It wasn't long before boarding commenced and we were on our way to Phoenix/Sky Harbor.

Having also driven between Phoenix and Flagstaff during my trip, I can safely say that flying was significantly more enjoyable.