

Mexico halts air carrier's operations

by Diane Lindquist

TIJUANA, Mexico - Airline passengers at Tijuana International Airport Wednesday were finding alternative ways to get to their destinations in Mexico after the government suspended operations Monday of Lineas Areas Azteca.

"Other airlines are trying to help the passengers, but the airlines can't help unless they have a traditional paper ticket," said Diana Gonzalez, a representative of the Viajes Ancla travel agency in the airport.

Three airlines - Avolar, Aviaca and Alma - are offering seats to passengers who had bought Azteca tickets at a cost ranging from \$50 to \$100. Aeromexico is offering a 10 percent discount.

The Mexican government suspended Lineas Areas Azteca operations after 57 agents conducted a 20-day nationwide inspection of all aspects of its business, said Enrique Valle Alvarez, director of the Tijuana International Airport.

"We were told they suspended operations because of safety, maintenance, training for pilots, control of spare parts, and also because they are in a very bad financial situation," Valle said.

The airline has 90 days to resolve the problems before being allowed to resume operations.

Tijuana's airport, which was one of Azteca's hubs, had among the greatest number of Azteca passengers at Mexican airports - about 2 percent of passengers flying in and out of Tijuana. Azteca flew to major domestic destinations throughout the country, such as Mexico City, Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta.

For a short time last year, Azteca offered a flight between Tijuana and Oakland, but it was dropped, as was a flight between Mexico City and New York City.

Airport operations in Tijuana were not greatly disrupted by the suspension, Valle said. He said about 400 people were affected Monday and Tuesday, when the airline had five flights per day.

"There were passengers on the plane on Monday, and the authorities just took them off," travel agent González said.

Wednesday, even though the bustling airport was filled with families getting away and arriving for the upcoming Easter holiday, few people seemed affected by Azteca's suspension.

Azteca representatives were not at the airport ticket counter. Notes posted on the window told passengers of the suspension. Other airlines taped up information about alternatives.

"We're hoping Azteca sends someone to print the e-tickets so people can change to the other airlines," Valle said.

Jose Rodriguez and his wife, from Los Angeles, were due to fly to Guadalajara Wednesday on Azteca to visit family for the holiday, but Rodriguez heard the news of the airline's suspension Monday.

"I said, 'Oh my, God. I've got a ticket on Azteca!' I went to my travel agency and paid 200 pesos (\$18) for seats on Aeromexico. That's not bad," Rodriguez said.

Some Azteca passengers were visiting a booth temporarily established by the Procuraderia Federal del Consumidor, the agency in charge of consumer protection in Mexico.

People can file complaints, said Marina Ramirez, who was staffing the kiosk, but the agency cannot do anything until Azteca resumes operations, if it does.

"The people that have money, they can buy another ticket," Ramirez said. "But there are people that don't have the money."

Azteca, based in Mexico City, was one of several low-cost airlines that sprang into operation following two plane crashes in 1999 and the bankruptcy in 2000 of cut-rate airline Taesa, the nation's third-largest airline.

Lineas Aereas Azteca has registered eight Boeing 737s with the government, but was only flying four planes.

The airline offered flights at seven of the 12 airports under the control of private operator Grupo Aeroportuario del Pacifico, or GAP: Tijuana, Mexicali, Aguascalientes, Guadalajara, Hermosillo, Morelia and Puerto Vallarta.

Passenger traffic on Lineas Aereas Azteca represented 5.5 percent of GAP's traffic and 3.2 percent of its revenue in 2006.

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