

Airport's pandemic doldrums fade with influx of holiday flyers

BY MEGAN RODRIGUEZ STAFF WRITER



Photos by Jerry Lara / Staff photographer

Axel Hernandez, 5, plays with his mother, Destiny, as they wait for a flight to Disney World on Tuesday at San Antonio International Airport. Her three daughters, including Ana, 7, right, were traveling with them.



Madeleine Pilgrim, left, and her mother, Kim Isaacson, walk to security at Terminal B of the San Antonio International Airport on Tuesday morning. They were headed to visit family for Thanksgiving.



Jerry Lara / Staff photographer

Passengers head to gates in Terminal A on Tuesday at the San Antonio International Airport. Saturday and Sunday each saw well over 14,000 passengers, and Tuesday had just over 15,000.

Kim Isaacson had stayed off airplanes since the start of the pandemic, afraid to catch the deadly virus from other passengers.

But Isaacson is feeling confident after getting her COVID-19 booster shot two weeks ago. The San Antonian said she was also encouraged by the low infection and high vaccination rates locally.

So she and her daughter, Madeleine Pilgrim, boarded a plane Tuesday morning to Detroit to visit Isaacson's parents, her sister and her sister's family for Thanksgiving.

"I'm just super grateful to be able to celebrate with my family again," said Isaacson, 51. "It was really hard last year. We did do Zoom, but it was the first time I hadn't been with them for the holidays."

Isaacson and Pilgrim, 21, are among the many getting back to their regular travel routines this Thanksgiving.

AAA Texas expects the number of U.S. air travelers this week to nearly reach pre-pandemic levels. The organization estimates that about 4.2 million people will hop on planes Wednesday through Sunday. That's 80 percent more than a year ago, but 9 percent less than two years ago.

About 230,000 Texans will travel by air this Thanksgiving week, a 77 percent increase from the same period in 2020, according to AAA.

Wednesday is expected to be one of the heaviest travel days of the year.

Rebounding numbers

San Antonio International Airport is busy this week, especially compared with last year's Thanksgiving week.

The airport usually takes in the most holiday travelers the weekends before and after Thanksgiving, according to airport spokesperson Rich Stinson. He said Friday was the first time since the pandemic began that the airport surpassed 16,000 travelers in one day.

Saturday and Sunday each saw well over 14,000 passengers, and Tuesday just over 15,000.

The airport has been rebounding from the pandemic doldrums. Last November, the number of travelers fell to 334,000 from 854,000 the same month in 2019.

This month, airport officials project, about 856,000 passengers will pass through San Antonio International.

“We’re excited about getting back to our pre-pandemic numbers,” Stinson said.

Staffing has been a challenge for the airport throughout the pandemic, but Stinson said the Transportation Security Administration and concessionaires have arranged their workers’ schedules to match peak travel times.

Airport officials don’t expect any major delays, long lines or flight cancellations in the coming days.

Still, Stinson said before leaving for the airport, travelers should check with their airlines to make sure their flights aren’t delayed or canceled.

People who need to park can visit the airport’s website to see in real time the number of open parking spaces in the garages. Travelers also have to remember to wear a face mask at the airport.

Family time

On Tuesday, San Antonio residents Curt and Susan Davis were headed to Virginia to visit family for Thanksgiving. The trip is a big one for the family. Curt’s mother has advanced Alzheimer’s, so they want to spend time with her, knowing it could be her last holiday season.

“Family is just so important,” Susan Davis said.

Susan Davis, 59, said she isn’t worried about COVID-19, noting that she and her husband have both been vaccinated.

Getting out of San Antonio this Thanksgiving is a way for Destiny Hernandez to help her kids cope with the absence of their father. The 33-year-old mother of four said her husband died in a car accident last year.

The family is traveling to Disney World this week. Before her husband died, the family went to Disney World once every year and a half or so, and Hernandez wants to keep up the tradition.

“To us, it’s a way to keep like normal,” Hernandez said.

Even in the midst of the pandemic last year, Hernandez said her family continued to travel. They went to Disney World for Christmas last year. Hernandez said she remembers the airport being “super dead.”

James and Jane Reed also said they started flying again last Christmas season. Jane, 57, said they got their COVID-19 vaccines as soon as they could in January and have taken multiple trips since then “without issue.”

Tuesday morning, the couple was heading to Chicago to visit their daughter for Thanksgiving.

“You have to live life,” said James Reed, 59. [megan.rodriquez@_express-news.net](mailto:megan.rodriquez@express-news.net)