

Ontario's Secret Is Out

Ralph Olson puts Ontario International Airport under the microscope to examine the fluctuating history of this Los Angeles facility.

Renewed local control is proving to be the secret of success at Ontario International Airport (ONT). It serves Greater Los Angeles, an area of 33,954 sq miles (87,940km²) with a population of almost 20 million. Competition comes from four other major commercial airports in a conurbation which is the largest metropolitan area in the USA.

This regional facility, within an area known as the 'Inland Empire', has seen ups, downs and issues over control in its almost 90-year history. A significant factor is a long but sometimes chequered history with its mighty neighbour 38 miles (61km) to the west - Los Angeles International Airport (LAX).

Making Tracks

A group of aviation enthusiasts staked a claim to establish an airport at the site now occupied by ONT in 1923. A Curtiss JN4 Jenny belonging to the 'First Friends

of Ontario Airport' landed on an unused dirt road near the Union Pacific railway (railroad) tracks in Southern California, about 38 miles east of downtown Los Angeles.

There were no homes in this area, which was dominated by almost endless orange groves, packing companies and a freezer station. Vast quantities of oranges were shipped to Chicago by train. Ice was added to the freight wagons (box cars) to keep the fruit cool.

The landing area became known as Latimer Field, named after the packing company next to the airstrip.

The city of Ontario purchased 30 acres (12.1 hectares) of land south of the tracks in 1929 for \$12,000, close to Latimer Field, and established Ontario Municipal Airport (ONT). The facility and its first tower were set up near the Union Pacific tracks so that pilots could gauge the direction and strength of the wind by observing smoke from passing locomotives.

World War Two

Huge changes came to the airport after the US joined the world war in December 1941. The following year a new tower was built on the north side of the field and the dirt runway extended.

Ontario soon became a centre of war activity. A new 4,700ft (1,433m) concrete strip was added and designated the northeast/southwest runway. The original one was refurbished and extended to 6,200ft (1,890m) and called the east/west runway. It was given a concrete surface and radar and instrument landing systems were installed. The works were funded by the government's Work Progress Administration at a cost of \$350,000. The expansion added 470 acres (190 hectares) to ONT and gave the facility a new, modern appearance.

On February 27, 1942, an Army Air Corps aircraft made the first landing at the new airport

and by the following year the site was a fully equipped Army Air Corps training and operations base.

The P-38 Lightning, built by Lockheed in Burbank, California, was the first military aircraft to be seen with regularity at the now Ontario Army Airfield (OAAF) where pilots were trained in air-to-air gunnery. Rookie pilots fired at long sleeves pulled by modified Lockheed Vega Ventura bombers. The airfield was also home to an operational North American P-51 Mustang unit.

Operations and training ceased at the end of the war and the army declared the airfield as surplus on November 15, 1945 when it went into inactive status for military purposes, although other civilian operations were allowed.

Military Legacy

The airport became a centre for freight and was renamed Ontario International Airport in 1946 on the back of regular transpacific cargo flights. On May 18, in the same year, a Douglas C-54 (DC-4) Skymaster of Pacific Overseas Airlines arrived at ONT from Shanghai, China, and began the first, but short-lived, regularly scheduled passenger service between the United States and Asia.

It was not until 1949, with the airport once again controlled by the city 'fathers', that airlines established a larger presence when Western Airlines began scheduled flights to Las Vegas. Bonanza Air Lines was the second carrier with Fairchild Hiller F-27 flights, also serving Las Vegas. These

early operations were limited both in frequency and destinations.

Commercial airline facilities were mainly former military buildings with the terminal, originally built to house a chapel, cinema and canteen for servicemen and workers during World War Two.

Although passenger numbers were limited, the airport was still a beehive of activity. Three major aircraft producers - Lockheed, Douglas and Northrop - had huge facilities on site and the state's Air National Guard (ANG) was also present.

Runway extensions in 1952, 1956 and again in 1962 were funded by the ANG to accommodate its faster and higher performance aircraft.

In the early 1960s, ONT still had a gravel parking area and services to only two cities. Routes and frequencies were being slightly improved when Bonanza began non-stop flights to Phoenix, Arizona, and Western started flying direct to San Francisco with a daily Lockheed L-188 Electra.

The city of Ontario's attempts to promote the airport were meeting with only small successes. Near the coast, Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) was attractive, growing and had clout with airlines that could, if it wanted, direct business to ONT. A diversionary airport was also needed for when frequent low cloud and fog blanketed LAX, sometimes for hours on a daily basis.

A deal came in 1967 when the city of Los Angeles purchased ONT for \$1.2 million and it became part of the area's regional airports system, even though its

title would not be officially transferred until 1985. A joint powers agreement included plans to develop the airport as the need arose. It was decided that Los Angeles would lead and Ontario follow, with a commitment to a regional airport plan for the facility.

More Routes

Jet service debuted at Ontario in 1968 when Pacific Southwest Airlines began Boeing 737 flights to San Francisco. This was followed a year later by Air California 737 flights to San Jose, California; Continental Airlines 720Bs to Denver, Colorado and Chicago; and Western Airlines 737s with non-stops to Salt Lake City, Utah, and Sacramento, California.

United and American Airlines began serving Chicago and Dallas from 1970.

The airport was growing fast as people discovered air travel as a new way of getting around, with trains quickly becoming regarded as outdated.

Demand for air travel at ONT rose steadily in the 1970s and 1980s with the airport passing the one million annual passenger mark in 1972, the two million passenger milestone in 1979, four million in 1986 and five million in 1989. As passenger numbers spiked, runways were expanded to match demand. ➔

Ontario's Terminal 2 is home to six airlines including China Airlines, which launched nonstop flights to Taipei in late March 2018.
All images author





ABOVE: Passengers at Terminal 2 queue for check-in for the non-stop China Airlines flight to Taipei.

TOP: The lower level of Terminal 4 consists of the baggage claim area and airline ticket counters.

ABOVE CENTRE: Both terminals have a central stair structure to the upper level to access security screening, shops, restaurants, lounges and all gates.

ABOVE, RIGHT: Passengers sit quietly at Gate 212 awaiting the call to board China Airlines Flight 23 to Taipei.

In 1981 a second east/west runway, 26L/08R, was built necessitating the removal of the old northeast/southwest runway, 4/22. The remaining existing one became 26R/08L, but construction was not complete until 1987 when the latter was extended to the east, bringing the two runway thresholds side by side, at a total cost of \$20 million. Runway 26R/08L is the longest at 12,197ft (3,718m) and is longer than any at LAX. It is often used as an alternative landing site for large aircraft when the primary international airport is fogged in.

The ability to switch to a nearby facility remains important because many transpacific flights may not have enough fuel left after a long flight to reach other major airports or to fly in a holding pattern waiting for the weather to clear.

During this period, when flights were diverted to Ontario, they were refuelled before continuing to their original destination, due to the limited customs facilities and lack of connecting flights at ONT.

Noise abatement restrictions are not as strict as those found at other Southern Californian airports such as John Wayne, Bob Hope and Long Beach. Although

it is allowed to operate around the clock, ONT shares the same night-time procedures as LAX.

Between 10pm and 7am, all turbojet and turboprop aircraft must arrive from the east on runway 26L or 26R and take off to the east on runways 08R and 08L. The procedure known as 'contraflow' is used, weather permitting, to minimise noise in the surrounding communities. Noise was also a factor when the airport was selected as the only facility in SoCal to host Concorde in 1986 during its promotional flight around the world.

Freak Weather

The airport benefits from more than 300 days of sunshine a year but there is a unique weather phenomenon that makes flying conditions challenging and at times nearly impossible.

The Santa Ana winds are strong and extremely dry, originating about 500 miles (805km) inland in the US Great Basin and affect all of inland and coastal Southern California. When they come roaring out of the northeast or southeast, they are very narrow in depth, meaning that winds at 10,000ft are moving at 100kts and do a rapid switch in direction below 1,000ft. The

gales blow in strong gusts and at 500ft can reach speeds of 70kts, which is hurricane force. Landing in these conditions puts pilots and aircraft at the limits of performance. During extreme Santa Ana conditions at ONT, pilots, at times, make several attempts to land and sometimes have to divert to nearby John Wayne or LAX airports where conditions are not so severe.

The burgeoning growth of air travel through the 1990s, dictated ONT's further expansion, with a new \$170 million twin terminal complex opening in 1998. Terminal 2 has 265,000 sq ft (25,620m²) and 12 gates, while terminal 4 is identical in size but with 14 gates. This project was completed four months ahead of schedule and \$26 million under budget.

Two older terminals located to the west of the new complex now house the airport administrative offices and a United Services Organisations (USO) facility.

Cargo

The facility is centrally located and can be reached easily by four major roads (interstate freeways). This location and accessibility were major factors in its selection as a major freight hub for United Parcel Service (UPS). Utilising



its fleet of A300s, 747s, 757s, 767s and MD11s, UPS operates 38 daily flights in and out, and serves as a southwestern regional hub for both air and trucking operations within a 13-state region.

With more than 200 based pilots, the company processes next-day and second-day packages destined for Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Orange, San Diego, Riverside and Ventura counties.

In 2015 UPS expanded its existing package-sorting facility at ONT to a \$53 million 416,000sq ft (38,638m²) building which sits on 30 acres of land.

The airport also sorts and distributes the majority of UPS International packages for delivery to the Pacific Rim with four of the six weekly flights flown by the company to China originating at the airport.

George Willis, currently President of US Operations at UPS and formerly responsible for the company's West Region, said in a media statement: "These investments in UPS's air and ground network illustrate UPS's commitment to customers in the Inland Empire and abroad, and we are part of



i Cargo

ABX Air
Amazon Prime Air (operated by ABX Air, Atlas Air and Air Transport International)
Ameriflight
Air Transport International
FedEx Express
FedEx Feeder (operated by West Air)
Kalitta Air
UPS

i Airlines Serving Ont

Aeroméxico
Alaska Airlines
Alaska Airlines (operated by Horizon Air)
American Airlines
China Airlines
Frontier Airlines
Delta Air Lines
Delta Connection
Southwest Airlines
United Airlines
United Express
Volaris

LEFT: Boeing 767-300F, N1181A is wet-leased by Amazon Prime Air from Atlas Air and is a regular visitor to the airport

LEFT: Ready for boarding, Boeing 777-300ER B-18006 is prepared for its return flight to Taipei. The aircraft was delivered to China Airlines in 2016.

Allegiant Air does not maintain a regular presence at ONT, but does fly occasional charter flights from the Californian airport on behalf of the US military.



ABOVE: Ontario serves as a regional hub for UPS's air and ground operations, with more than 200 of the carrier's pilots based at the airport.

Ownership

ONT underwent a name change in 2006 when it became LA/Ontario International Airport, mainly to avoid confusion with the province of Ontario in Canada. During the mid-2000s, traffic increased to more than 7 million by 2007. The boom didn't last. By 2013, passenger numbers had dropped to 3.9 million from 7.2 million in 2007, a decline of 43%. In 2008 JetBlue Airways and ExpressJet both stopped serving the airport. Other airlines followed suit by reducing flights. Many blamed the cuts on the state of a US economy in the grips of a recession. Ownership and control of ONT became an issue in late 2010 when the city of Ontario criticised and questioned how Los Angeles World Airports (LAWA) operated the airport, positing that was the reason for the reduction in passenger numbers. Ontario claimed the airport it once controlled faced extinction because Los Angeles had kept ONT out of the promotional and marketing loop. The city fathers' argument ran that the precipitous decline in passenger levels was not simply reflective of a downturned economy but demonstrated a

trend to give secondary airports less emphasis, while favouring of large hubs. Passenger numbers supported the theory. LAX grew from 62.4 million in 2007 to 66.6 million in 2013, an increase of more than 6%. The city of Ontario claimed losses of \$24.9 million to \$58.1 million in tax revenue from lost passenger traffic from 2009 to 2013. Then Ontario City Manager, Chris Hughes, said in 2012 that 1.3 million cars travelled to LAX for flights that should be offered from ONT. In 2015 LAWA tentatively agreed to return ownership to the city of Ontario. LAWA was to be reimbursed for its investments at the airport and job protection was offered to its employees. The transfer was completed on November 1, 2016, with a joint powers agreement between the city of Ontario and San Bernardino county. The airport is now owned and operated by the Ontario International Airport Authority (OIAA) and the airport name has been restored to Ontario International Airport. New Beginning The airport made a flying start under its new owners. New services to Chicago and Dallas were initiated by American and

i Aircraft Spotting
Go to the southern perimeter near the UPS ramp. From this area you will be able to photograph aircraft landing on runways 26L/26R from the road.

Southwest Airlines. On the international front, Volaris introduced Leon, Mexico, to the roster and North Carolina-based Dynamic International Airways began a new charter to Nanchang, China, with its fleet of 767s during the summer months. Low-cost airline Frontier began flights to its home base in Denver, Colorado, plus Austin and San Antonio in Texas. The largest commitment in a decade came from low-cost carrier JetBlue Airways, which returned towards the end of last year (2018) with a daily non-stop New York service. China Airlines followed with a much-anticipated announcement of new route to Taiwan with the 777-300ER, which started in March 2018, the first carrier to offer non-stop, transoceanic service to ONT. With international traffic on the rise, a much-needed upgrade of infrastructure is in the planning stages. In January 2017, the OIAA commissioners agreed to seek



ABOVE: Both the air traffic control tower and fire station are near one another on the south side of the airport.

ABOVE LEFT: As well as being a major international airport, Ontario is also home to many private business jets. Fixed base operator Guardian Jet Center recently renewed its lease at the facility for another 15 years.

✈ Airport Statistics

IATA code	ONT
ICAO code	KONT
Operator	Ontario International Airport Authority
Location	34 03 22 N 117 36 04 W
Elevation	944ft/288m
Runways	08L/26R 12,197ft / 3,718m, 08R/26L 10,200ft / 3,109m
Website	www.flyontario.com

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Further Work

A 15-year lease extension with Guardian Jet Center on the airport's south side will produce more than \$5 million in rent payments and fund upgrades to existing facilities and construction of a third general aviation hangar. There are plans to make it easier for passengers to reach the airport by car, public transport and 'app' companies such as Uber and Lyft. New concessions agreements and commitments to remodel retail space, and new in-terminal and outdoor advertising are designed to bring millions in additional revenues. The ability to generate income beyond landing fees and terminal rents paid by the airlines is critical for commercial airports, particularly mid-sized facilities like ONT. OIAA President, Alan D Wapner, said in an official statement: "The improvements to our business operations and the investments we've made, and will continue to make in our facilities, are solidifying our future for generations to come. Ontario International is a growing airport, but we're committed to maintaining the convenience and positive customer experience that sets us apart in Southern California."

Federal Aviation Administration chief, Michael Huerta, an Inland Empire native who stepped down from his post at the beginning of 2018, praised the local authorities for persevering in regaining control of the airport. In a light-hearted remark, he likened it to "the dog that caught the car", acknowledging the monumental task of the OIAA to oversee ONT's operation. The completion of ONT's first year of local ownership has produced heartening results to date as passenger volumes are increasing month over month. Indeed ONT is in the midst of its longest period of sustained growth since 2007. Huerta said in a press release: "If I were a betting man, my money would be on Ontario to succeed as an aviation gateway." Wapner added: "Ontario is no longer a well-kept secret in Southern California aviation as industry leaders learn more about the market's best mid-size airport, they are concluding that ONT is the place to be." ✈

i Acknowledgements
The author thanks to Willie Edwards and Steve Lambert for their assistance with this article.



BELOW: Southwest Airlines is the busiest carrier at Ontario, operating predominantly from its Terminal 4 base.