

FBO Profile: Desert Jet Center

by Curt Epstein

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Phase I of the Desert Jet Center FBO at Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport in Thermal, California, opened in October and consists of a 7,000-sq-ft terminal and a 23,000-sq-ft hangar. The company expects to soon begin work on a multi-million dollar Phase II, which will include a new large hangar and additional ramp. (Photo: Curt Epstein)

It's been a year of changes for California's Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport (TRM). Located in the desert near Palm Springs, the designated GA gateway is the sort of place where you can stand by the runway in the still of the night and hear the howls of coyotes in the darkness, yet it handles approximately 300 operations a day.

In October, the airport saw the long-anticipated opening of the permanent home of Desert Jet Center (DJC), the newest of its then three full-service FBOs (another facility on the airport offers self-serve Jet-A and avgas pumps along with some other amenities). That was followed shortly after by the announcement of the sale of the Signature Flight Support location there to on-field rival Ross Aviation, which reduced the FBO number to two.

Desert Jet began at TRM in 2006 as a charter operator and soon added aircraft management and maintenance to its services. As one of the biggest tenants on the field, company founder Denise Wilson received permission to establish a new FBO, which began operations from a temporary facility in 2016. The road to the opening of its new facility was a bumpy one, however. The company initially received an unusually truncated build period in which to complete the new FBO, and its start was immediately delayed by airport-imposed hurdles, which stalled construction for months. The company was eventually forced to plead its case before the county board of supervisors in order to receive additional time to complete the facility.

Occupying a more than seven-acre leasehold, DJC features a 7,000-sq-ft terminal with passenger lobby and a refreshment area known as the "Dessert Bar" featuring local fruits and snacks; pilot lounge; shower facilities; a pair of eight-seat, A/V-equipped conference rooms; rampside observation deck; onsite laundry and dishwashing service; crew cars; pet relief area; onsite car rental; and complementary customer vehicle detailing. In the blazing summer months, when temperatures can reach 120 degrees in the shade, the company provides indoor vehicle parking in hangar space it rents for that purpose. Adjoining the terminal is a new 23,000-sq-ft climate-controlled hangar that can accommodate the latest ultra-long-range business jets, and it is home to the company's own charter fleet consisting of three Citation CJ3s, two Citation Bravos, and a Bombardier Challenger 300. Other occupants include an Embraer Legacy 650, a Hawker 400, and a King Air 250. The company also offers a Part 145 maintenance shop with mobile AOG service to other airports in a 150-mile radius as well as a mobile aircraft detailing business.

Phase II expansion plans call for the construction of another at least 30,000-sq-ft hangar, with the company currently seeking regulatory approval. It hopes to break ground within a year.

The airport, which is looking to add U.S. customs clearance within the next two years, has seen a rising trend of activity, according to Roman Mendez, DJC's general manager. "Over the past 10 years, fuel sales have actually doubled," he told **AIN**. "If you look back at 2010 to 2020 the annual fuel flow at this airport has gone from 1.1 million gallons to over 2.3 million gallons of fuel a year."

His Epic Fuel-branded location pumps approximately 700,000 gallons of that fuel a year and the DJC fuel farm consists of a 12,000-gallon Jet-A tank with room for expansion to another 17,000 gallons of storage. It is tended by a pair of 5,000-gallon jet refuelers and a 750-gallon 100LL truck operated by the company's NATA Safety 1st-trained and IS-BAH Stage II-registered line staff. Mendez noted the company sees few avgas sales with most piston customers opting to use the self-service facility at the airport.

With the recent departure of Signature, he expects the DJC facility, which is open from 6 a.m. until 10 p.m. with after-hours callout available, to see its share of business on the airport grow from operators no longer tied to the former Signature facility's loyalty rewards program there, and once they try it, he believes they will stay. "We're here to build relationships," said Mendez. "We're not looking to be the biggest guy on the field, we're looking to just deliver the best service."

TRM has long been known as luxury resort area, particularly among the Los Angeles glitterati, and it attracts its fair share of snowbirds, with traffic picking up in November. While things typically get crazy every April when the celebrity-magnet Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, and its country music sister festival Stagecoach attract upwards of 80,000 people and scores of business aircraft for three consecutive weekends, this year's events were postponed until October due to the Covid-19 crisis. The airport is located just 10 minutes from the venue, providing quick access to performers and attendees alike.

The airport was built during World War II and served to train Army Air Corps and then U.S. Navy pilots. It was given to Riverside County at the end of 1948. Named Thermal Airport, it was changed briefly to Desert Resorts Regional Airport, before adopting the name of famed aviatrix Jackie Cochran in 2004.

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