

Mexico for the way: A guide to safe, popular travel spots

By Laura Bly and Jayne Clark, USA TODAY

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Scared of narco-terrorists? So are we.



By Jayne Clark, USA TODAY

San Miguel de Allende features narrow cobble streets and a large expat community.

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But that doesn't mean we've written off all of Mexico, where the ramped-up war against and between violent drug cartels has spooked many would-be visitors.

Border areas notwithstanding, "most of the country has a pretty low crime rate," and tourists usually aren't targets, notes international security expert Bruce McIndoe of iJET Travel Intelligence. "Yes, there's room for collateral damage, but you can get struck by lightning, too."

PHOTOS: Mexico for the way

Even the U.S. State Department, whose recently expanded warning cautions against non-essential travel to parts or all of 14 (out of 31) Mexican states, exempts most of the country's marquee tourist spots — including these nine:

Cancun/Riviera Maya

Cancun's manicured beaches, cheap margaritas and plethora of U.S. chain restaurants have helped make it the country's top destination for party-hearty types. But the Caribbean state of Quintana Roo, which runs south to the Belize border, is gearing up for a different celebration. Though some doomsday theorists equate the end of the "Long Count" Maya calendar on Dec. 21,

2012, with the end of civilization, local tourism promoters beg to differ — and are touting everything from archaeological lectures to a "Mayan Galactic Alignment" cruise.

Riviera Nayarit

Stretching 100 miles along Mexico's Pacific coast from Nuevo Vallarta north to San Blas, this region packs a lot of stylistic variety. Prefer all-inclusive chain hotels? Try Nuevo Vallarta. If money's no object, slip inside the gated enclaves of Punta Mita. If you like water sports by day and watering holes by night, the town of Sayulita is your spot. If you're seeking peace and quiet in an artsy village, check into one of San Francisco's (aka San Pancho's) small hotels. Beach options range from secluded, rocky coves to palm-fringed expanses flanked by the Sierra Madres.

Los Cabos

The coastal towns of Cabo San Lucas and San José del Cabo, connected via a 20-mile expanse of glitzy resorts and gated all-inclusives known as The Corridor, cater to tourists of all stripes — from tequila-swigging spring breakers to privacy-obsessed Hollywood stars. (Arriving in June: global honchos bound for the G20 financial summit.) While desert sun and the turquoise Sea of Cortez may be the area's biggest draws, up-and-coming San José del Cabo offers free art gallery walks on Thursday evenings from November through June.

Mérida

This colonial city on the Yucatán Peninsula is the ideal spot from which to explore important Maya archaeological sites like Chichen Itza and Uxmal. The city has one of the largest historical centers in the Americas (next to Mexico City and Havana), and many of the Spanish colonial buildings from its wealthy past remain. (Look for carved Maya stones that were used in

the construction of some.) Check into one of many small, elegant hotels downtown near the central square, or stay in the countryside at one of several fabulously restored haciendas.

San Miguel de Allende

Yes, there's a Starbucks. But despite its gringo trappings (and glut of gringo residents), San Miguel retains its essential Mexican colonial loveliness. From its luminescent neo-Gothic church to its shady patchwork of central plazas that are a gathering spot for locals and visitors alike, it's one of the country's most welcoming towns. Visit during "fiesta season" — September through December — when the weather is temperate and there always seems to be a feast, procession or party going on along its cobble streets.

Oaxaca

You could spend days just hanging around the central plaza — one of Mexico's most enchanting. Surrounding restaurants serve spicy, complex molés, among other regional specialties. And the people-watching is superb. But tear yourself away to explore nearby crafts villages whose residents, descendants of Zapotec Indians and other indigenous groups, weave rugs, carve wooden animals, create pottery and more. Also nearby: major archaeological sites such as Monte Albán.

Valle de Bravo

For decades, this scenic 17th-century town of whitewashed buildings with red-tile rooftops has provided a weekend playground for the elite of Mexico City, two hours away. But its fabulous setting on the shores of sparkling Lake Avándaro surrounded by pine-forested mountains is attracting outdoors enthusiasts for paragliding, wakeboarding, mountain biking and more. Pine groves east of town are wintering grounds for millions of monarch butterflies that migrate from Canada, providing a not-to-be-missed spectacle from November through February.

San Cristóbal de las Casas

Though it's not easy to reach -- the closest airport in Tuxtla Gutierrez is more than an hour's mountainous drive away -- this Spanish colonial outpost and former center of a failed Zapatista uprising in 1994 is well worth the journey. The one-time backpacker and bohemian hangout is now home to upscale boutique hotels and restaurants, and serves as a convenient launch pad for rafting and hiking trips and explorations of traditional Maya-speaking villages. The haunting Maya ruins of Palenque are about a five-hour drive to the northeast.

Loreto

Founded by Jesuit missionaries in 1697 and site of a failed government tourist project that would have turned it into a West Coast Cancun, this small Sea of Cortez town lures kayakers, scuba divers, fishermen and sailors with easy access to what author John Steinbeck described as an ocean filled with "ferocious life." An uninhabited string of five nearby islands makes up Loreto Bay National Park; about 2½ hours away on the Pacific side of the peninsula, gray whales congregate in protected Magdalena Bay to mate and give birth from January through March.

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Is it safe to travel to Mexico? Judging from the numbers, many are saying 'Yes'

By Jayne Clark, USA TODAY

Updated <1m ago

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Despite tales of drug violence, visitation to Mexico was up almost 19% over last year, as of September. And with 22.6 million tourists expected by year's end, numbers will about equal the record-breaking totals in 2008. About 80% of visitors are North American.



CAPTION By Paolo Carosso

In fact, slightly more foreigners are vacationing in Mexico now than before the drug wars, which have killed about 30,000 (mostly drug traffickers) in the past four years, *The Economist* reported in November. Mexico now ranks No. 10 in international arrivals worldwide.

I'm just back from San Miguel de Allende, a gorgeous colonial city in central Mexico (read about it Friday at usatoday.com/travel), where, not surprisingly, more than one conversation during my visit turned toward security concerns.

But not the sort of concerns you might think. The Americans I spoke with there were worried about the bum rap they believe the entire country is getting due to drug violence that, for the most part, is concentrated hundreds of miles away near the U.S. border.

"There is very little crime here, and what there is doesn't affect gringos," said Irina Posner, a retired CBS News employee and one of an estimated 12,000 to 14,000 ex-pats who live full or part-time in San Miguel. "We love this town. We feel safe in this town."

So did I, covering miles of narrow, cobbled walkways solo by day and by night in the 17th-century city. I felt as secure as I do in my own neighborhood, yet some innkeepers say they've had cancellations due to safety concerns.

Americans are notoriously near-sighted when it comes to geographical perspective. It's an issue Mexico's new tourism secretary Gloria Guevara addressed in an on-line seminar sponsored by the trade publication, *Travel Weekly*, last month. She acknowledged there are places in Mexico that tourists should avoid, specifically Matamoros and Ciudad Juarez on the Texas border. (And frankly, aside from those looking to do a cheap booze run, I'm not sure who would have frequented those border towns even before the drug-cartel bloodbaths).

"But for the rest of the country, you can relax and enjoy yourself," she told the *Travel Weekly* audience.

Actually, as someone who has traveled all over Mexico, I think I'd also skip Acapulco, which had a spate of nasty drug-related killings in September. But Acapulco many years ago ceased to be an American vacation destination.

Mexico's tourist sweet spot is [Cancun](#), about 1,000 miles from Ciudad Juarez. Aside from an [August bar shooting in a working-class neighborhood](#) far removed from the resort zone, there has been no reported drug violence there. Another popular, earthier destination, is the Copper Canyon, which lies more than 200 miles from the border, or about the distance between New York and Baltimore.

"If you were planning a trip to New York, would you cancel it if you heard about challenges in Baltimore?" Guevara asked.

Vacation costs -- mainly hotels -- are down in Mexico. The average tourist spends about 5% less than in 2008, *The Economist* reports. And a number of forecasters are predicting that discounting in [Cancun](#) and south along the [Riviera Maya](#) will make that region particularly popular this winter.

The website [Travelzoo](#), for instance, lists a [four-night package, with air and all meals and drinks starting at \\$562](#) per person, double. It's good for travel Jan. 4-31, but must be booked by Jan. 10.

Another website, [Smarter Travel](#), cites increased air service as likely to boost travel to Mexico. On Dec. 1, Southwest Airlines joined with Mexican carrier [Volaris](#), allowing customers to travel on a single itinerary booked on Southwest. On Dec. 15, Alaska Airlines begins service between San Jose and Guadalajara, and from Sacramento on Dec. 16. On Feb. 10, American Eagle launches daily nonstop service from Dallas to Veracruz and Queretaro. And on Feb. 12, American begins seasonal service between Chicago and [Cozumel](#).

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Travel expert: Why you should go to Mexico

New York (CNN) -- Mexico tourism is having a bit of a PR problem lately.

Reports of mass grave sites, daylight shootings and carjackings from the escalating drug war don't exactly build confidence for a family planning a week's holiday. And on April 22, the U.S. State Department upgraded its travel warnings to target 14 of Mexico's 31 states.

Now's not the time to visit our southerly neighbor, right? Well, wrong. Mexico is a lot safer than you may realize.

We tend to lump all of Mexico -- a country the size of Western Europe -- together. For example, a border incident resulted in the [death of a Colorado tourist](#) last year, and the Texas Department of Homeland Security recommended against travel to all of Mexico.

Yet it's in the 17 of 31 states not named in the [newly expanded warnings](#) where you'll find the most rewarding destinations: the Yucatan Peninsula and Baja California beach resorts, colonial hill towns like the ex-pat haven of San Miguel de Allende, even the capital Mexico City.

[Mexican protesters march to end drug war](#)

An hour inland from Cancun's beaches, Yucatan state -- home to the most popular Mayan sites and "real Mexican" colonial cities such as Merida and Valladolid -- is among the country's safest. The state, with roughly the same population as Kansas, saw two drug-related deaths in 2010. Wichita, Kansas, alone had six gang-related killings over the same period.

[Lonely Planet: 8 top places to \(safely\) visit in Mexico now](#)

In most of central and southern Mexico, drug violence simply isn't on the radar of daily life. "It's as easy-going as it's always been," said Deborah Felixson, a diving operator on Cozumel who is "shocked" when people say they had been scared to go to the Caribbean island. "We're just small communities here. We all know what everyone's up to."

That sentiment is found even in places once linked with political tension, such as Chiapas state and Oaxaca City, where political protest turned into a stand-off in 2006.

"Things are so much quieter now," said Rogelio Vallesteros, who runs a Spanish-language school in Oaxaca City. "People call to ask about safety all the time, then they come and see how quiet it is. We're normal, really."

[Mexico tourism official: Vacation spots far removed from violence](#)

After the swine-flu crisis of 2009 -- when some cruise ships diverted routes from Mexican ports that had no reported cases to American ones that did -- travel bounced back a bit last year. Interestingly, the increase of returning Canadians and many Western Europeans doubled that of the American rate. We seem to remain particularly leery of Mexico.

That's sad. My love of travel began with childhood visits to Mexican ruins and beaches, and I feel the U.S. is fortunate, not cursed, to be so close to a place that offers jungles, deserts, volcanoes, beaches, coral reefs, ancient pyramids, living pre-European cultures and some of the world's most satisfying cuisines.

And of course the best reason to go: the people.

A couple years ago, I informally polled various innkeepers and tour operators worldwide to find out who are the world's friendliest travelers. Guess who won. "Mexicans are such a joy to have here," one Bulgarian guesthouse owner e-mailed back. "They make everyone feel happier."

And it's often better in Mexico, where locals show particular gusto in love of life. Once I saw fireworks go off in Mexico City, before sunset, and asked a local why. He was surprised I didn't know. "It's Friday," he explained.

In restaurants, strangers seeing each other's eyes instinctively say "buen provecho" before eating. It's an earnest wish that their food should not only be tasty, but really pleasurable, and that the hope that their life will be a bit better as a result. There really is no English equivalent. Even our adopted "bon appétit" pales in significance.

Naturally, crime exists everywhere in Mexico.

I've been pickpocketed in Guadalajara (and in New York, too). But that's the extent of my unpleasant scrapes in a dozen visits that have taken me to home-stay language courses, traditional Mayan markets, mummy museums, cenotes (surreal limestone sinkholes in which you can swim) and even Zapatista zones in the south.

Most travel to Mexico, ultimately, is simply good travel. It's fun, affordable, eye-opening and fascinating (seriously, what other city of 21 million other than Mexico City is founded on a filled-in lake?).

But, no, you don't have to visit Mexico. And there are certainly places, like Ciudad Juarez or Tamaulipas state, I'd never visit now. Just know that the Mexico experienced on the ground almost never matches the Mexico we increasingly see and read about.

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The Washington Times

Mexico strives to revive tourism

Official takes to road, aiming to calm fears of drug violence

By Tim Devaney



The Washington Times

6:15 p.m., Sunday, July 31, 2011

For many Americans, vacationing in Mexico doesn't have the same appeal it used to.

Not after drug lords have killed thousands of bystanders in recent years. Or after the warning the U.S. State Department issued against traveling to that country during the Fourth of July weekend. It is just not a risk worth taking for many travelers.

So it's no surprise American tourists have cut back on trips to Mexico, according to statistics from that country's tourism department. The number of U.S. travelers going there is down 2 percent this year, and those who still go are staying one less day and spending about 20 percent to 30 percent less on their vacations.

That's why Gloria Guevara, Mexico's tourism secretary, is in the United States, campaigning for more visitors from the north. She is visiting New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Seattle, Atlanta and Washington, D.C., as she tries to win back American travelers for her country. Right now, tourism makes up 9 percent of the country's gross domestic product. Mexico's goal is to go from the world's 10th-most-popular tourism destination to a top five spot by 2018.

"We believe that we can do better," she said. "Once you go and try it, and you like it, the next time that you hear Mexico, you will know better."

To reach that goal, Mexico is promoting its heritage as a tourism attraction. It is advertising Mayan history, adventure-travel opportunities such as swimming with whale sharks, and the country's famous cuisine.

"You will try some things here that you cannot find anywhere else," Ms. Guevara said.

Still, the U.S. remains Mexico's leading tourism customer. Americans represent 60 percent of the nation's 22.4 million tourists each year. And that is why Ms. Guevara is here, campaigning for more tourists to visit Mexico. She blames the recent decline in American tourists mostly on the current state of the U.S. economy.

But as fewer Americans vacation in Mexico, the country to the south is also trying to diversify its tourism industry so it doesn't take another big hit in the future.

"When the U.S. had big troubles, we saw an impact and suffered big time," Ms. Guevara said. "But one of the strategies is to diversify, and we're making a lot of progress."

Mexico is promoting itself around the world as a top tourism destination. So far this year, Russia has sent 60 percent more tourists there than it did at the same point in 2010. Tourists from Brazil are up 46 percent from last year, and China is up 34 percent. A number of other countries, such as France, Japan, the United Kingdom, Canada and Germany, are sending more tourists Mexico's way, as well.

"We see other nationalities," she said. "We have seen the number of Brazilians, Russians, Chinese that come to Mexico has increased. And they're spending much more."

Ms. Guevara decried the notion that Mexico is too dangerous to vacation in.

"When we're talking about the U.S., when something happens in a specific destination, we never say, 'the U.S.' We say, 'Last week, there was a shooting in California,' and we say exactly where. We talk about L.A., we talk about New York, we talk about Washington. Very, very specific.

"Unfortunately, when people talk about Mexico, they don't say, 'Something happened in this small town, in this state, in the middle of nowhere,'" she added. "They say, 'Mexico.' Well, Mexico is a pretty large country, so we're trying to put things in context."

She went on to explain that only 80 of Mexico's 2,500 counties pose a danger to tourists. "But those points are very far away from the tourist destinations," she said. "If something happens in L.A., does that mean that I cannot come to Washington? Of course not."

She also explained that the Mexican drug lords who are causing tourism problems are not targeting American citizens.

"The crime is cartels against cartels, drug dealers against drug dealers," she said. "Nothing against regular citizens, nothing against tourists. They don't care about them."



Puerto Vallarta Remains a Safe Place For Travel and to Retire

By [Chris E.Haines](#)

Puerto Vallarta is known for its beauty, culture and friendly people and is still considered one of the safest places to visit or retire. The Sierra Madre mountains surround the Bay of Banderas, the second largest bay in North America, second to the Hudson bay. People from around the world come to enjoy its pristine beaches and surrounding jungles. Fun activities are abound; sailing, fishing, hiking, mountain biking, kayaking, horseback riding, bird watching, tequila tasting, walking through beautiful botanical gardens, art enthusiasts and eating exquisite foods, having something to offer for everyone. For those considering retiring to the area, a wide range of homes are available whether it be beach front, hillside or back country haciendas at all price levels ranging from the low 100K to multi-million dollar villas on the beach are available.

Over the past couple of years Mexico has received a great deal of negative press regarding the safety of foreigners traveling and retiring in Mexico. The fact is that a large percentage of violent crimes are connected to inner fighting of the drug cartels and drug related crimes. If you discount any drug related crimes which do not involve the public at large, tourists or retirees, one could say that Mexico is one of the safest places to visit or live in the world. In fact, less than one percent of violent crimes involve the general public, that is one crime per thousand, where the U.S. has a much higher rate with almost five per thousand.

It could be said that visiting or living in Los Angeles is much more dangerous than most parts of Mexico. What areas you visit in any region around the world is directly correlated to one's safety. One would never venture into the East Los Angeles area knowing that it one of the most dangerous places in the United States. The same applies to any city around the world. If you travel to a foreign country it is always recommended to educate oneself what areas to avoid.

Puerto Vallarta has always been rated one of the safest and friendliest places to live and visit and continues to remain so. Violent crimes are un-heard of and any crime that does take place, are in locations that are known to be unsafe whether you are a local or a foreigner, and if a crime does take place it is almost always drug related. Vallarta relies on most of their revenue coming from tourists and the rapidly growing retirees moving to the area, therefore the local government expends a great amount of effort and money to protect locals and foreigners alike. The fact that one sees a great deal of police force when visiting Vallarta, is not that crime is high, but are there to guarantee everyone's safety. In addition to the local police force, military personnel are also in place to deal with any drug related crimes, creating an even safer environment. Puerto Vallarta has the, justly deserved reputation, for safety and security. It's quite safe to stroll back to your hotel or home at 3am without any hassle at all.

The negative press one usually hears involving foreigners is mainly related to excessive drinking and unsafe activities. Accidents involving spring breakers and foreigners can occur any place in the world, so of course it is recommended to always be safety conscious anywhere you are visiting or living.

You can learn more about retiring in Puerto Vallarta at www.g3mex.com and search for your second home or one to retire to. You also can e-mail to request further information on Real Estate in the region at info@g3mex.com or calling 877-688-3874 to consult with an expert at the G3MEX Group.

Come visit the wonders of Puerto Vallarta and the surrounding region and learn firsthand why it is considered one the most beautiful and safe place to visit or retire.

Source: Chris Haines, Senior Partner of the G3MEX Group

G3MEX Group is a Real Estate Investment, Development and Broker Services company centrally based in Puerto Vallarta, just minutes from the airport. Our market focuses on the coastal waters of Puerto Vallarta, inside Puerto Vallarta's Bay of Banderas, and the exterior north and south zones of the bay.

Contact Chris Haines for more information on purchasing Real Estate in Puerto Vallarta at chris@g3mex.com.

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