

**latimes.com**

## **How Mexico's drug war affects tourism**

**Violence has increased, but some areas are relatively safe and airlines are adding flights.**



**Some Mexican states, such as Baja California Sur, above, remain relatively calm. Across the country, the number of international visitors rose in 2010 despite the drug war. (Dario Lopez-Mills / Associated Press)**

December 26, 2010

What can travelers expect from Mexico in 2011? That's at least a \$64-million question, given the many Americans who visit the country every year. And the answers seem to point every which way.

Across Mexico, international visitors and drug-war casualties rose in 2010. As the country moves into its third century — and President Felipe Calderon's drug war moves into its fifth year — experts say both trends could well continue.

Airlines are adding Mexican destinations. Several notable new lodgings are opening, including a

pair in southern Baja California and two more in artsy, historic San Miguel de Allende.

Gloria Guevara Manzo, Mexico's tourism secretary, has set a 2011 goal of boosting total tourist numbers by 15%.

And yet, "we're probably going to see similar or higher levels of violence next year," said Charles Pope, assistant director of the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego.

The Mexican government counted 12,456 drug-war deaths in the first 11 months of 2010, nearly twice as many such deaths as it counted in all of 2009. Although the violence has been spreading, about 45% of those deaths occurred in two states: Chihuahua (which includes Juárez, the murder capital) and Sinaloa.

Meanwhile, several other states remain relatively calm, including Baja California Sur, which includes Los Cabos and La Paz. (That state reported six drug-war deaths in the year that ended June 30.) In much-visited Quintana Roo (which includes Cancún and Playa del Carmen), 42 drug-war deaths were counted during that time.

In the state of Baja California, which includes Tijuana and the northern half of the Baja peninsula, the drug-war death tally was 352 for the 12 months that ended June 30. That might seem an alarming number, but it marked a decrease from 589 killings a year earlier.

"It's quite remarkable" to see tourism and violence tallies rising together at the national level, Pope said.

In its most recent Mexico warning, on Sept. 10, the U.S. State Department ([www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov)) outlined how the drug-war trouble varies by region and recapped its longstanding advice about concealing your jewelry, traveling mostly by daylight, staying in well-trodden tourist areas, avoiding gypsy cabs and other measures.

For more advice and regional specifics, look at the guidance the Foreign & Commonwealth Office ([www.fco.gov.uk/](http://www.fco.gov.uk/)) gives to Brits bound for Mexico.

And while you're looking, remember that overall travel to Mexico has been rising. In the first 10 months of 2010, Mexican officials say, the country received 8.2 million international visitors by air, business and leisure combined. That's 17.8% more than during the same period in 2009 and 6.4% more than in 2008. The number of Americans in that group — 4.9 million — was up 13.5% over 2009.

Those numbers don't mean the tourist trade is thriving; the continuing deep discounts on Mexican cruises in 2011 are a clear sign that it takes price-slashing to fill beds. But for many businesses, 2010 marked the beginning of the long crawl back after a disastrous 2009, when the drug wars and a spate of fatal flu cases scared away million of travelers.

Though the weak recovery has kept many Americans and Canadians from traveling abroad, Mexico tourism spokeswoman Elizabeth Tjaden said, many see Mexico as a more affordable

option.

In Los Cabos, hotel occupancy in 2010 ran about 5% ahead of that in 2009. As the tentative recovery continues, Gonzalo Franyutti, president of Los Cabos Convention & Visitors Bureau, said in an e-mail that he expected many lodgings to offer "added value" deals in the months ahead, while airlines increase Mexico flights.

Earlier this month, Alaska Airlines launched thrice-weekly flights between San Jose and Los Cabos, four flights weekly between San Jose and Guadalajara and three flights weekly between Sacramento and Guadalajara.

Meanwhile, Virgin America on Dec. 16 started flying between San Francisco and Los Cabos five times a week. On Jan. 19, the carrier will start flying between LAX and Cancún (five times weekly), and on Jan. 20, it will start flying between San Francisco and Cancún (three times weekly).

Though recession has delayed or killed many hotel projects across the country, others have been completed.

In the historic expat refuge of San Miguel de Allende, about 180 miles northwest of Mexico City, an upscale 67-room Rosewood San Miguel de Allende hotel is scheduled to open in early February. Opening rates begin at \$295 a night (<http://www.rosewoodsanmiguel.com>).

Also in San Miguel, the boldly contemporary boutique Hotel Matilda, with 32 rooms, opened in September. Mid-January rates begin at \$266 weekdays, \$295 weekends (<http://www.hotelmatalda.com>).

In La Paz, the CostaBaja hotel complex open in November on the site of the old Fiesta Inn, with a spa, 250-slip marina and golf course designed by Gary Player. It has been offering its 115 hotel rooms for \$139 to \$329 (<http://www.costabajaresort.com>).

In Cabo San Lucas, Grand Solmar Land's End Resort & Spa (the fifth Solmar property in Los Cabos) is scheduled to open in February with 119 suites ([solmar2-px.trvlclick.com/solmar.html](http://solmar2-px.trvlclick.com/solmar.html)).

In Mazatlán, the beachfront, 71-room Las Villas Hotel & Spa opened in June within the Estrella del Mar resort area. Pre-tax rates begin at \$120 a night for a standard room (<http://www.mazatlanhotellavillas.com>).

—*Christopher Reynolds*

Copyright © 2010, [Los Angeles Times](#)