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## **Tourism Secretary's Report about Mexico's Tourism Sector Positive, but Violence Remains Unspoken Truth**

by *Carlos Navarro*

Category/Department: Economy

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President Felipe Calderón's administration continues to paint a positive picture about the country's tourism industry despite growing concerns that rampant violence could deter foreign visitors and even discourage Mexicans from traveling within their own country. Tourism Secretary Gloria Guevara Manzo was in charge of casting a positive spin on Mexico's tourism trends during testimony to the Mexican Congress in mid-October. She reported that overall tourism thus far in 2010 had increased by more than 7% relative to 2009 and that a record US\$12.7 billion was spent in Mexico during the summer-vacation period. Guevara failed to mention that this year's numbers are compared with the depressed data for 2009, when a scare about the H1N1 virus kept many visitors from traveling to Mexico ([SourceMex, May 6, 2009](#)) and ([May 13, 2009](#)). Conversely, the increase came despite the surge in drug-related violence, which has hit areas frequented by foreign visitors, especially the resorts in Acapulco, the cities along the US border, and the industrial city of Monterrey.

### ***Visitors increase from 2009***

Guevara was one of the Cabinet ministers summoned to testify to Congress as legislators analyzed various aspects of Calderón's State of the Nation report, which was presented in written form to legislators in September ([SourceMex, Sept. 8, 2010](#)). The tourism secretary said Mexico has survived the global economic crisis by gearing its campaigns to countries less affected by the downturn. She noted that the number of visitors from Brazil increased by more than 94% and by about 51% from both Argentina and Spain. A total of 11.3 billion foreigners visited Mexico during the first half of 2010, an increase of about 5% from the same period in 2009.

Guevara told Congress that the financial problems of Mexicana, one of the country's top two airlines, could affect travel. The airline, which filed for bankruptcy this summer ([SourceMex, Aug. 4, 2010](#)), has suspended most operations, reducing options for the traveling public. She said other airlines have filled some of the void, but "there are not enough available seats" to cover the shortfall.

The tourism secretary, who was appointed to her position early this year ([SourceMex, April 14, 2010](#)), said the Calderón government is showing its commitment to strengthening the tourism industry by investing in infrastructure. During the past year, the administration allocated 1.6 billion pesos (US\$129 million) to tourism projects in 28 states, an increase of more than 23% from 2009. "The public resources were directed to 229 infrastructure projects," said Guevara. "Our public investment in eight states with high levels of poverty has reached 356.5 million pesos (US\$29.5 million), which is 55% more than at the end of 2009."

### ***Tourism board launches promotion campaign in US, Canada***

The Secretaría de Turismo (SECTUR) has also invested heavily in promotion in the US and Canada, in an effort to convince potential visitors from those countries to travel to Mexico. The Consejo de Promoción Turística de México (CPTM), a unit of SECTUR, launched an advertising campaign in

August in partnership with the US advertising company JWT. The campaign, entitled "Mexico, The Place You Thought You Knew," seeks to lure travelers from the two North American countries to famous beach destinations as well as natural wonders, cultural sites, and cities that have not been typical destinations for US and Canadian citizens. One spot shows a group of vacationing friends at cultural and natural attractions near the colonial city of San Luis Potosí.

"The CPTM's investment in its North American campaign is 30% above what was spent in 2008, its baseline year, and targets 50% of the population, with the goal of generating more than three impressions per person," said Reuters.

By presenting the positive aspects of Mexico, the CPTM is attempting to counter the negative publicity the country has received because of recent drug-related violence ([SourceMex, Feb. 3, 2010](#)) and ([Sept. 15, 2010](#)), which has especially hit the cities and states near the US border. Drug killings have also been frequent in states popular with US and Mexican tourists, such as Michoacán and Guerrero, which includes the popular resort city of Acapulco. For the most part, the violence and illicit activities by drug cartels has not affected tourists, although some incidents have been reported. These include shootings along Costera Miguel Alemán and the kidnapping of 20 tourists from Michoacán in Acapulco in early October.

The CPTM is aware that violence could deter some visitors, but officials say the tourism-promotion board does not plan to issue any alerts. "Our job isn't to talk about security. Our job is to talk about the assets we have as a country," said CPTM operating chief Rodolfo López Negrete. "The positives vastly outweigh these very isolated situations we have in the country."

The US government is sending a mixed message regarding the dangers of travel in Mexico. "Millions of US citizens safely visit Mexico each year," said a State Department warning dated July 16. The message emphasizes that some 1 million US citizens reside in Mexico and that resort and tourist destinations do not experience the level of violence rampant in border areas or drug-trafficking corridors.

But the message does not leave out relevant information, pointing out that more than 22,700 people have been killed in drug-related violence since late 2006 and that street gun battles are common in a number of cities.

The State Department also notes that drug traffickers have "kidnapped guests out of reputable hotels" in the industrial and business hub of Monterrey and that drug-related murders in the north-central state of Durango have increased tenfold in recent years.

Still, the dangers do not deter some organizations from showcasing Mexico. In mid-October, the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) announced that its eighth annual Adventure Travel World Summit would be held in San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas in October 2011. Adventure travel is a type of tourism that involves exploration or travel to remote and exotic areas.

"The summit ties in directly with Mexico's overall tourism strategy because we want to complement the world's understanding of Mexico as a sun and beach destination to show a side of Mexico that is even more exotic and diverse naturally and culturally," said CPTM marketing coordinator Antonio del Rosal. "For years, we've witnessed the bottom-line positive effects of the ATTA's impact on destinations which have previously hosted summits such as Brazil, Quebec, and Norway, and we believe such global attention on Chiapas next year will help usher in a new era of responsible

tourism for Mexico." [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Oct. 13, reported at 12.37 pesos per US\$1.00]

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