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## Mexico Forges Ahead with Tourism Promotion Despite Ongoing Drug-Related Violence

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Economy

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The Mexican government is putting a positive spin on the state of its tourism industry despite the extreme drug-related violence that might be keeping some foreign visitors away. Among other things, the administration has launched a series of innovative promotional videos to be aired in the US and has begun a megatourism project along the Pacific Coast. And the somewhat rosy picture presented by President Felipe Calderón is supported by some statistics, which expect the number of foreign visitors to exceed the 22.4 million who visited Mexico last year.

But there are also red flags. Despite the federal government's efforts to clean up the main beach resorts in Mexico, only 17 of the 245 beaches have free-of-pollution-certified sites. And some deep wounds were opened in the tourism sector when the government moved the annual Tianguis Turístico de México away from Acapulco ([SourceMex, April 4, 2011](#)). The fair, which will be rotated among several cities around the country, will be held in Puerto Vallarta in 2012.

This led to some suggestions that the Secretaría de Turismo (SECTUR) and the Consejo de Promoción Turística de México (CPTM) are using the event to gain political favors from local communities. But there is a stark reality. The drug-related violence in Acapulco might have been a small factor in the tourism authorities' decision to move the country's largest industry fair outside the port city ([SourceMex, July 23, 2006](#)).

### *Drug violence remains a constant in some tourist destinations*

While government officials continue to tell would-be visitors that drug violence generally occurs away from areas most frequented by tourists, some communities along the US-Mexico border that were once popular destinations for North American visitors, including Ciudad Juárez and Nuevo Laredo, are now seeing very little tourist traffic.

And the drug violence is beginning to deter visitors to venues once considered safe, or at least not as dangerous. Among these is Monterrey, which has been one of the more popular destinations for business travelers ([SourceMex, March 3, 2011](#)) and ([Sept. 1, 2011](#)).

More recently, the port of Veracruz, which has tended to attract both national and international visitors, was the site of a gruesome event. On Sept. 20, suspected members of a drug cartel dumped the bodies of 35 people suspected of having ties to a rival organization near the community of Boca del Rio, a popular destination for tourists. The victims were thought to have been associated with the Zetas drug cartel, and prosecutors speculated that the killers might have been linked to the Gulf cartel or the Sinaloa cartel.

The high-profile killings in Veracruz could not have come at a worse time for the Calderón government, which had just launched an innovative publicity campaign in the US to draw visitors to Mexico. The "Royal Tour" campaign includes episodes filmed at impressive tourist spots in Mexico. The shows feature travel journalist Peter Greenberg and Calderón rappelling into the Sótano de

Golondrinas cavern in San Luis Potosí, exploring an underwater cave in Quintana Roo, watching gray whales in the Sea of Cortés, and flying in a hot-air balloon over the Pyramid of the Moon in the Teotihuacán archeological site. The shows will air on the US Public Broadcasting System (PBS).

At the ceremony to unveil the campaign, held at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, Calderón was forced to answer questions about tourist safety in Mexico. "Let me tell you that the problem of violence is mostly limited to the battle between one organization and another," the Mexican president said. "It is tied to narcotics trafficking and not with tourism, and that is a very important distinction."

The Mexican president told reporters that his staff tried to dissuade him from taking such a prominent role in the promotional campaign, in part because it would open him to criticism from political opponents. "It could have been a mistake," he told reporters at the Guggenheim. "But we did it, because I feel so proud of Mexico. I love my country, and I know so well that Mexico has so much to offer the world. I had so much fun doing this."

Even with the explosion in drug-related violence, the Calderón government appears to have succeeded in its extensive efforts to convince international visitors that most destinations in Mexico are not dangerous. A SECTUR report released on Sept. 25 said that the number of foreigners who visited Mexico in August of this year was up from a year ago, with the totals up significantly among travelers from Russia, Ecuador, Australia, Argentina, Great Britain, and South Korea. It said tourists from 145 countries traveled to Mexico in August, primarily from the US.

Tourism officials pointed out that the number of visitors to Mexico was up about 3% thus far this year and that the country is on pace to surpass last year's total of 22 million foreign tourists.

Industry sources reported other important trends. For example, speakers at the Feria Internacional de Turismo de las Américas (FITA) 2011, organized by Universidad Anáhuac in México state, said Mexico has begun to attract an increasing number of conventions. But they suggested that promoting conventions should not be grouped with general tourism but treated as a separate effort. Conventions, they said, account for about 1.4% of Mexico's GDP, generating almost 784,000 direct and indirect jobs. "We have to stop viewing the industry of conventions and gatherings as simply another division of tourism," said Alejandro Watson, president of MPI México.

The depreciation of the Mexican peso relative to the US dollar has also been a factor in attracting visitors to Mexico. In a report issued in late September, the Banco de México (central bank) said the Mexican currency had declined about 6% versus the US dollar since last year, making visits to Mexico more attractive. The report said foreigners most frequently visited Quintana Roo, Baja California, Chiapas, Mexico City, Acapulco, Guadalajara, Veracruz, and Monterrey.

### *Government launches megaproject in Sinaloa state*

As part of its effort to boost tourism, the federal government is also encouraging major tourism-related projects. In late September, Calderón announced plans to construct a major resort complex near the municipality of Escuinapa in Sinaloa state. The megaproject, known as Playa Espíritu Santo, is intended to provide a destination along the Pacific Coast similar to Cancún, on the Caribbean Sea. The project, which will be funded with a combination of public and private capital, will be constructed in nine phases over a period of 25 years at a cost of about US\$13.6 billion. Under the plan announced by the president, the resort would offer 40,000 hotel rooms and comprise an area twice as large as Cancún.

Calderón boasted about the economic-development potential of the project, which he said would create about 70,000 direct jobs and another 200,000 indirect positions. But residents of the Chametla ejido (collective farm) are not pleased with the project and made their feelings known with a demonstration in Mazatlán. About 300 protestors from the Asociación Indígena de Totoramis de Chiametlan held a march as the president spoke at the World Tourism Day celebration in Mazatlán. The demonstrators directed their protests at the federal and state governments as well as a judge who upheld the government's move to take over the land previously owned by the ejido dwellers.

### ***Bad feelings linger from decision to relocate huge tourism fair***

There is some infighting within the tourism industry. Officials in Acapulco and Guerrero state are angry about Calderón's decision to move the Tianguis Turístico away from the port city. Instead, cities around the country with strong tourism orientations will be allowed to submit bids to host the huge annual fair. In a joint bid by the states of Jalisco and Nayarit, the Pacific resort of Puerto Vallarta and the adjacent tourist area known as Riviera Nayarit won the right to host the event in 2012. The colonial city of Puebla will host the event in 2013.

Some critics took issue with the decision to move the event from Acapulco, which hosted the industry gathering for 36 years. The city has been besieged by extreme drug violence, some of which has spilled over to tourist areas ([SourceMex, Jan. 19, 2011](#)). "Acapulco needs help, not actions that would harm it," said Pedro Cano, director of public relations at the Hotel Crown Plaza de Acapulco.

Bernardo Stril Kremper, who writes a column for Poblanerias.com, said taking the event away from Acapulco would be equivalent to removing the Festival Internacional Cervantino from Guanajuato or the traditional pre-Easter Carnaval from Veracruz. He wondered what reaction would occur if France were to move its traditional film festival from Cannes, or if Brazil were to hold its famous Carnaval in a city other than Rio de Janeiro.

"Felipe Calderón and his tourism secretary got their way," said the columnist. "The Tianguis had been known as one of the principal vehicles to promote Mexico to would-be international tourists."

### ***Beach pollution remains a concern***

Other concerns also affect the Mexican tourism industry, including a reputation that many of the country's beaches are polluted. Mexico has worked hard to address this problem after reports surfaced in 2003 of severe contamination at popular beach resorts ([SourceMex, July 23, 2010](#)).

But the Comisión Nacional del Agua (CONAGUA) reports that many municipalities near the country's 245 most important beaches continue to dump wastewater into streams and rivers, contributing to coastal contamination. The problem stems from the lack of water-treatment infrastructure, currently available to about half the country. "In the coastal areas, about 10% of waste water is dumped directly into rivers and streams, and it ends up in the ocean," CONAGUA director José Luis Luege Tamargo told participants at the VII Encuentro Nacional de Playas Limpias in Mazatlán.

Luege said CONAGUA has implemented a program that allows resort communities to take actions to certify that their beaches are clean. Only 17 of the 245 beaches in the country had been certified as pollution free under the voluntary program. "Even though a site does not have the certification, this does not mean it is in bad condition," said Luege. "The certification is completely voluntary and

consists of a long and expensive auditing and certification process. Nevertheless, the certification allows the site to gain a strong international reputation, making it a premium brand."

Some critics suggest there are conflicting messages on whether Mexico has actually been able to prove to would-be international visitors that its beaches are clean. For example, Mariana Boy Tamborell, in charge of environmental policy at the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM), said there are differing standards by the Secretaria de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT), which oversees CONAGUA, and the Comisión Federal para la Protección contra Riesgos Sanitarios (COFEPRIS). This past summer, COFEPRIS reported that two beaches in Acapulco and one in Zihuatanejo in Guerrero state registered levels of contamination higher than the accepted norm. This report had different criteria than the certification program offered by CONAGUA.

"Reliable and timely information about water quality will give users certainty and help our country improve on the sustainability of our coasts," said Boy Tamborell.

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