

1-11-2012

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Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Mexico Uses Publicity Surrounding Mayan 2012 Prophecies to Boost Tourism in Southeastern States." (2012). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5852>

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Mexico Uses Publicity Surrounding Mayan 2012 Prophecies to Boost Tourism in Southeastern States

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Tourism and Economic Development

Published: 2012-01-11

The Mexican government is hoping that the publicity surrounding the Mayan solar calendar will contribute to a banner year for the country's tourism industry. According to the calendar, the current year—ending on Dec. 21, 2012—will be the last year in a cycle of 5,125 years that began in 3114 B.C. Some archeologists point to scientific evidence found in Maya stelae, codices, and other sources that the current year presages "a change of epoch" for humanity.

Mexican officials see this milestone year as an opportunity to promote tourism in the southeastern states where Maya culture prevails—Campeche, Chiapas, Tabasco, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo. The Secretaría de Turismo (SECTUR), the Consejo de Promoción Turística de México (CPTM), and the tourism offices of Quintana Roo and Yucatán states estimate that 52 million tourists will visit the five states corresponding to the Mundo Maya during the next 12 months for the start of a new cosmic cycle in the Maya calendar. The domestic and foreign visitors are expected to spend about 270 million pesos (US\$19.7 million) in the five states. The publicity surrounding the Maya prophecies is also expected to help tourism in Guatemala and Belize.

"The Maya cosmology has sparked the interest of tourists and students of the matter worldwide, something that will be an important element of tourism promotion," said SECTUR.

Other observers agreed. "They're expecting to do some serious business," Gerardo Aldana, an expert in Maya history and hieroglyphics at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB), told the Los Angeles Times.

While SECTUR and the CPTM are expected to put special emphasis on the Mundo Maya campaign, the promotion efforts are part of a larger campaign to diversify tourism outreach overseas. A major emphasis will be on attracting tourists from the US, Canada, and Europe to Mexico, including to some areas that have in the past been plagued by drug-related violence ([SourceMex, March 2, 2011](#), and [Sept. 28, 2011](#)). The southeastern region could be attractive to foreign visitors because the tourist areas in the five-state region have generally escaped the drug-related violence.

Mexican tourism authorities will work closely with travel agencies and cruise lines on the promotion effort. The Profecías Mayas 2012 campaign is expected to double the number of cruise ships traveling to the Yucatán Peninsula this year. "We could see about 160 ships in Puerto Progreso this year," said the tourism publication Pulso Turístico. "And, considering that each ship has the capacity to transport 500 passengers, this could mean an important economic windfall for the region."

Tourism authorities are developing other promotions besides the 2012 prophecies to bring tourists to the Maya region. For example, Cancún and other nearby resorts are planning a campaign to attract gay and lesbian couples from the US, Canada, and Europe by promoting the region as a place where they can legalize their unions. Mexico City is the only jurisdiction in Mexico to fully

allow gay marriage ([SourceMex, Feb. 17, 2010](#), and [Aug. 25, 2010](#)). Quintana Roo state has not made changes to its laws to specifically allow gay unions, but a loophole in the state legal code allows such unions. Patricia Novelo, a spokesperson for Colectivo Diversidad, said the state civil code only makes mention of "people interested in getting married," without specifying their gender, which facilitates the same-gender unions.

Authorities are working with airlines and hotel chains all along Mexico's Caribbean coast to facilitate marriage ceremonies. "This market niche...is very attractive for European, Canadian, and American [homosexual] couples," said Novelo, who noted that eight Mexican gay and lesbian couples were scheduled to marry in January."

Skeptics abound

Some skeptics dismiss the 2012 prophecies as a misinterpretation of Mayan lore. References to 2012 as the end of a major cycle of the 5,100-year Maya Long Count calendar have been around since the 1960s. The date—established as the Dec. 21 winter solstice since at least the 1980s—is said to coincide with an extremely rare "galactic alignment" of the sun and the center of the Milky Way galaxy. Several movies reinforced the hoopla around the prophecies, including the film *2012*, released in 2009.

One recurrent vision is that a huge meteorite will hit Earth and cause a disaster similar to the one that occurred about 65 million years ago in the area currently known as Chicxulub in the Yucatán Peninsula.

The general consensus among scholars is that Mayas never intended for the end of the Long Count calendar, which is one of several Maya calendars, to signal the end of the world.

Aldana also points out that the formulas used to align the Maya calendar with the Gregorian calendar were based on a misunderstanding and could be as much as 50 to 100 years off.

Freddy Poot Sosa, an expert at the Yucatán-based Centro de Investigaciones y Documentación Indígena, affiliated with the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI), points to another clear discrepancy. Poot Sosa says the end of the year actually begins on July 21 if measured under the Gregorian calendar. He says a majority of Mayans, about 70%, resides in urban areas in Mexico and has adopted the western custom of celebrating the new year on Jan. 1.

A downside for Maya communities

Lost in all the publicity surrounding the Mayan prophecies is the negative impact that an increase in tourism will have on local Mayan communities. "The arrival of a large number of visitors could cause many of these communities to lose their principal source of wealth: their traditions and customs," said the Servicios Informativos y Publicitarios del Sureste (SIPSE) news service.

"About 80% of the Mayan communities rely on agriculture and have seen very little change to the customs and traditions," said Erick Jiménez Muñoz, co-author of the book *Tan Cerca del Caribe Mexicano y Tan Lejos del Turismo* (So close to the Mexican Caribbean and so far from tourism).

Jiménez Muñoz said tourism would bring irreversible change, including the rise of tourism-related enterprises that would bring "easy money" to these communities. "This could bring social and economic instability to the population," the author said.

Francisco Armand Pimentel, a deputy secretary at the Quintana Roo tourism ministry (Secretaría de Turismo, Sedetur), said authorities are well-aware of this problem and are working closely with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to minimize the impact on indigenous communities. He acknowledged, however, that there is very little time to implement a comprehensive plan, with European tourists beginning to arrive in the early part of January.

"We are collaborating with the IDB's Inter-American Fund for the Development of Indigenous Peoples to produce a model in Quintana Roo that could promote orderly and coordinated tourism development in Maya communities, taking into account social as well as commercial factors," said Armand Pimentel.

The concerns about the impact on Mayan culture are balanced by the need to increase sources of economic development for the region, and tourism provides such an avenue.

"Outside the promotional slogans, the Mayan community continues to face poverty, inequality in educational opportunities, and a disdain for its language, customs, and economic conditions—all of which promote marginalization and discrimination," said the Mexico City daily newspaper *Excelsior*.

Poot Sosa pointed to the most recent study from the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS), released in 2010, which found a lack of income opportunities. Four of 10 respondents said they had no income whatsoever, while another 30% said they earned the minimum wage or less.

The study found that the principal agricultural activity among Mayan communities was cultivating corn. A small minority of communities were dedicated to raising cattle or poultry. Other economic activities included construction and service jobs. About 5% of the members of the communities were employed in technical or professional activities. "A prominent source of income is the production of arts and crafts, which is a key element of the federal government's efforts to develop tourism in the area," said *Excelsior*. "The reality is that a mere 1% of the population is dedicated to this activity."

The CIESAS study said the economic fortunes of the Mayan communities in the Yucatán Peninsula are hampered by low educational levels. About 22% of the heads of families did not have any education, another 23% completed primary school, and 13% finished middle school.

CIESAS noted that educational levels are intimately connected with the principal language used in the communities, which is one of many Mayan dialects. A majority of the heads of family interviewed for the study, about 60%, said knowledge of the native language was "very important," but 95% considered that both Mayan and Spanish languages should be taught in the schools, which is something that is not happening at present. "The efforts to develop a bilingual and intercultural curriculum have failed," said *Excelsior*. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Jan. 11, 2012, reported at 13.65 pesos per US\$1.00.]

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