Despite Challenges, Tourism Sector Grew Under Former President Felipe Calderón

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One of the top accomplishments of President Felipe Calderón’s government was to keep the tourism industry afloat despite significant challenges that slowed the influx of foreign visitors and inhibited the ability of Mexicans to travel to popular destinations. Among other problems, the administration had to deal with an outbreak of the H1N1 flu in the spring of 2009 (SourceMex, April 29, 2009, Aug. 5, 2009, and April 14, 2010) and drug-related violence that escalated out of control during the president’s six-year term (SourceMex, March 11, 2009, Oct. 13, 2010, and Sept. 28, 2011).

In mid-November, then Tourism Secretary Gloria Guevara Manzo reported to participants at the leadership council of the Consejo de Promoción Turística de México (CPTM) that 201.7 million foreign tourists visited Mexico during the six years of the Calderón government, an increase of almost 25% from the total of 162 million tourists recorded during the previous administration of ex-President Vicente Fox (2000-2006).

The increase was attributed in part to a major tourism campaign, the Acuerdo Nacional por el Turismo, and extensive investments by the Calderón government in tourism-related infrastructure. Guevara said the administration spent about 33.4 billion pesos (US$2.6 billion) in this area, far surpassing the expenditures made during the administrations of Fox and ex-President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000).

Guevara said private investment in the tourism sector totaled about 20.1 billion pesos during in the recent administration, about 56% above the amount spent during the Fox years.

Mexico also received recognition from the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). UNWTO secretary-general Taleb Rifai offered Mexico as an example of coordinated efforts to boost tourism through the Acuerdo Nacional por el Turismo, signed in February 2011. But the slightly less than 4% growth registered by Mexico during the year was below that of other countries listed in the UNWTO’s Tourism Barometer of the Top 10 destinations. Germany (ranked eighth) saw an increase of 7%, followed by the US (ranked second) with 6%. Several countries in Central America, none of which is among the top 10 destinations, experienced increases higher than Mexico, including El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama, and Costa Rica.

"Mexico has remained slightly below the global median of 4% and was not able to boost its growth rates even with the change in the way visitors are measured, which now includes a more accurate accounting of arrivals through the southern border," financial columnist Carlos Velázquez wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior.

Drug violence did not deter US tourists

Still, it appears that the drug-related violence has not deterred US tourists from visiting Mexico. Recent statistics released by the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) indicate that the number of visitors who arrived in Mexico from the US through the first 10 months of 2012 was up by more
than 7% from the same period a year ago. "If this pace is maintained, the total number of US visitors arriving by air would surpass 6.1 million, which would be 400,000 above the totals for the previous year," wrote Velázquez.

The influx of tourists from the US has remained steady despite travel warnings from the US government. In February of this year, the US State Department warned US citizens to postpone or avoid travel to 14 states in Mexico (SourceMex, March 7, 2012). The advisory was expanded in mid-November to include 19 states.

"This Travel Warning supersedes the Travel Warning for Mexico dated February 8, 2012 to consolidate and update information about the security situation and to advise the public of additional restrictions on the travel of US government (USG) personnel," said the State Department. The advisory includes the northern states of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Durango, where the Zetas drug cartel has been very active in the past several years (SourceMex, Feb. 1, 2012, and Oct. 17, 2012). The advisory also includes most northern and central states, including Sinaloa, Sonora, Baja California, Jalisco, Aguascalientes, San Luis Potosí, and Colima. Further south, the states on the list include Morelos, Guerrero, Chiapas, Veracruz, Michoacán, and México states.

But the State Department warning also carried this disclaimer. "Millions of US citizens safely visit Mexico each year for study, tourism, and business, including more than 150,000 who cross the border every day. The Mexican government makes a considerable effort to protect US citizens and other visitors to major tourist destinations, and there is no evidence that Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) have targeted US visitors and residents based on their nationality," said the advisory. "Resort areas and tourist destinations in Mexico generally do not see the levels of drug-related violence and crime reported in the border region and in areas along major trafficking routes."

**New president also expected to give priority to tourism**

Mexico’s newly installed President Enrique Peña Nieto is expected to continue and perhaps expand the government’s efforts to boost tourism. In speeches during the electoral campaign and after he was elected, Peña Nieto promised to convert tourism into a tool to boost Mexico’s economic growth. In one of the early proposals shortly after he was inaugurated, the president said he would seek to improve tourist-related transportation, including the return of passenger trains to Mexico.

Despite his pledge to make tourism an important economic tool, Peña Nieto appears to have made a political rather than a practical appointment to head the Secretaría de Turismo (SECTOR). The president selected Claudia Ruiz Massieu as tourism secretary. "Contrary to what many expected and wanted, the new tourism secretary did not come from within the sector nor has she had any relationship with the industry, as was the case with her predecessor [Gloria Guevera]," columnist Gustavo Armenta wrote in Milenio.com.

But Armenta and others noted that Ruiz Massieu, niece of ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari and daughter of the late Guerrero ex-governor Francisco Ruiz Massieu, has ample experience in management and politics and continues to enjoy a good relationship with the business and political communities.
"The best thing that could happen is to have a tourism secretary who is close to the president and who has enough political weight to ensure that her proposals are taken seriously by other high-level officials," said Armenta. Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Dec. 5, 2012, reported at 12.91 pesos per US$1.00.}

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