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Mexican Tourism Experiences Banner Year in 2015

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Mexico’s tourism sector experienced a banner year in 2015, setting a record for the number of foreign citizens who visited the country by air. However, insecurity at some popular destinations, a sluggish global economy, and the outbreak of the Zika virus could keep the number of domestic tourists and foreign visitors down during 2016.

In a report issued in late February, the Secretaría de Turismo (the tourism ministry, Sectur) reported that a record 32.1 million international tourists had traveled to Mexico by airplane during 2015, bringing unprecedented revenues of almost US$17.5 billion for that category of visitor. The total number of visitors who came by air during 2015 increased by nearly 10% from 2014. Similarly, revenues during 2015 rose by about 8% from 2014.

A large number of tourists traveled to Mexico via other modes of transportation, including land and cruise ships, bringing the total for the year to about 85.7 million foreign visitors in 2015, said the Centro de Información y Estadística para el Empresario Turístico (the center for tourism information and statistics, CIEET).

The total for 2015 fell short of the all-time high of slightly more than 88 million foreign visitors in 2009, but was well above the nearly 80 million visitors recorded in 2015, according to statistics from the Asociación Mexicana de Agencias de Viajes (the Mexican association of tourism agencies, AMAV).

Sectur said domestic tourism also increased during 2015, as measured by hotel occupancy and other data. The tourism ministry reported that 80 million Mexicans booked hotel rooms last year, along with another 120 million who traveled to tourist destinations but stayed with relatives or friends. This brought the total to 200 million domestic tourists. While Sectur did not offer comparative figures for 2015, the AMAV said domestic tourism has been increasing steadily since 2007, when just fewer than 183 million tourists traveled domestically.

“Our challenge is to maintain this rate of growth,” said Tourism Secretary Enrique de la Madrid Cordero. According government statistics, the tourism sector accounts for 8.5% of Mexico’s GDP, surpassing other important sectors, such as agriculture, banking and finance, and construction.

Foreign visitors spending less

While the tourism data for recent years has been relatively positive, analysts pointed to a troublesome trend and a number of red flags that could limit the potential for the sector this year and beyond. Even though foreigners traveled to Mexico in large numbers, statistics from the central bank (Banco de México) indicate that average expenditures from overseas visitors fell steadily over the past two years. In 2013, the average expenditure per tourist per visit amounted to a record US $491, but the figure declined to US$488 in 2014 and US$483 in 2015.

“The decline could signal a very serious problem for Mexico,” said Gerardo Herrera, a specialist on the tourism industry at Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. “More tourists may
have visited Mexico because travel to our country is a bargain and not because the quality of our attractions has improved."

“We need to promote a variety of destinations, and each destination must have its unique advantages,” said Rodolfo López Negrete, director of the Consejo de Promoción Turística de México (the tourism promotional council, CPTM). “As long as we offer this type of variety, [foreign tourists] are going to extend their stay in Mexico. The perception overseas is that all our tourist attractions are the same.”

While Mexico must work to enhance its tourist sector, officials note the global economy could have a mixed impact on Mexico this year. Uneven economic performances in the US, Canada, the European Union (EU), and Japan could limit the number of foreign visitors this year. However, the recent slide of the peso relative to the US dollar could help boost the number of foreign visitors to Mexico.

“Even with adverse economic trends, there are favorable factors, like the rate of exchange, which makes it attractive to travel to Mexico,” said de la Madrid, who expects the tourist sector to see figures in 2016 similar to those of 2015.

Zika virus, insecurity could deter visitors

Notwithstanding the administration’s optimistic view, certain factors could limit the influx of foreign visitors to Mexico, including the ongoing violence and insecurity in once popular tourist destinations like Acapulco, and the outbreak of the Zika virus in Latin America (NotiSur, Feb. 19, 2016).

“In the first two weeks of January, there was strong optimism about the immediate future of the tourist sector. This changed in the second half of the month, when the situation started to become more complicated,” financial columnist Carlos Velázquez wrote in the daily newspaper Excélsior.

According to Velázquez, the problems include the decision of the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a health emergency due to the spread of the Zika virus in Latin America, the difficulties in Canada’s economy (which experienced the lowest growth in 2015 since the 2009 recession), and the Mexican government’s decision to reduce public spending by 132 billion pesos (US$7.4 billion) this year (SourceMex, Feb 10, 2016).

As of March 1, Mexico had recorded 121 cases of Zika infections throughout the country, and there is some concern that the impact on tourism could mirror what took place in 2009, when Mexico declared a health emergency because of a major outbreak of swine flu (SourceMex, April 29, 2009, and May 6, 2009). A similar scare occurred in 2012 with a smaller outbreak of the virus, known as AH1N1 (SourceMex, March 7, 2012).

The Zika virus is transmitted by the Aedes aegypti mosquito, which thrives in hot and humid weather, the same conditions that prevail in Mexico’s most popular tropical destinations during the spring and summer months. The Secretaría de Salud (the health ministry) has launched a campaign to reassure potential visitors that the risk of exposure to the Zika virus is minimal. It has said the disease is under control and far from the country’s main tourist centers.

“Officials at the CPTM, led by Rodolfo López Negrete, have made a major effort in recent months to put together a communications campaign to downplay the problems related to insecurity and the government’s campaign against drug traffickers,” Velázquez wrote in Excélsior. “Now they are
fighting a ‘war’ against the mosquito that carries the Zika virus, which is creating major concerns among those who promote [Mexican] tourism in the US.”

“The similarities are evident,” Velázquez added. “The WHO has identified Mexico as one of the countries where the virus is present, and would-be US travelers are reacting in an expected manner.”

While the problems with Zika might not be significant at this point, the concerns about insecurity are real, particularly in places like Acapulco, which is now considered the most violent city in Mexico because of the hundreds of murders that have occurred each year in that resort community. More than 1,600 murders were reported in Acapulco in 2015, and 684 other murders were reported in that city in January and February, according to government reports.

The violence is largely the result of a power struggle among criminal organizations for control of the port, which is a major entry point for drugs originating in Colombia and other parts of South America. The violence has reduced the number of visitors to the once popular destination over the past decade (SourceMex, March 11, 2009, March 2, 2011, and Feb. 13, 2013).

The presence of the Mexican Army and federal police has helped deter some of the crime in the tourist zone, but only to a small extent. The number of murders spiked during a five-day period in February during the visit of Pope Francis to Mexico. This is because many of the forces that had been on patrol in Acapulco were withdrawn from the city to provide security for the visiting pontiff.

While the lion’s share of murders occur away from the tourist zones, recent killings have taken place in sites frequented by tourists. Four people were assassinated on the beach in recent months by men who arrived on jet skis. The latest victim was a seller of beachwear who was shot three times on the chest. “[The perpetrator] calmly made his way back to the jet ski where his accomplice was waiting and disappeared around the rocky headland to the west,” wrote the London-based newspaper The Daily Mail.

Despite the bloodbath, Guerrero Gov. Hector Astudillo Flores has offered reassurances that the resort will be safe for visitors during Easter Week, a traditional period for Mexicans to take a holiday. “The vacation period is not in jeopardy,” said Astudillo Flores, who offered to reinforce patrols in Acapulco’s tourist zone.

The problems of insecurity are not as significant in other popular tourist destinations, such as Cancún and Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo, but the perception of Mexico as a dangerous place remains a deterrent for the Mexican tourism industry. “It has been impossible to promote any type of tourism-related project” because of this perception, said Jorge Laurel González, director of the Asociación de Hoteles y Empresas Turísticas (the association of hotels and tourism enterprises, AHETA).

Some tourist sites like the resort of Huatulco, in Oaxaca, suffer a different kind of problem. “The low growth at this location is not the result of insecurity but of the lack of connectivity, poor roads and an airport with a very small capacity,” said CNNMéxico.

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