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New Advisory Warns U.S. Travelers about Violence in Mexican Resort Areas

by Carlos Navarro

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The US State Department issued an updated travel advisory on Aug. 22 warning US citizens and residents to exercise caution when traveling to the state of Quintana Roo, including the resort areas of Cancún, Cozumel, Playa del Carmen, Riviera Maya, and Tulum. These resort areas top the list for the locations most visited by US travelers.

“US citizens should be aware that according to Government of Mexico statistics, the state of Quintana Roo experienced an increase in homicide rates compared to 2016,” said the advisory. “In Quintana Roo, the state where Cancún is located, 169 killings were reported from January to July, more than twice as many as during the same period last year.”

Although most of the homicides seemed to target members of criminal organizations, the advisory said, turf battles between criminal groups have resulted in shootings in areas frequented by US citizens, and innocent bystanders have been injured or killed.

The advisory also specified problems in Baja California Sur—home to Los Cabos and Cabo San Lucas—a popular destination for US visitors from California. The State Department said 232 slayings have been reported in the area this year, nearly four times as many as during the same period in 2016. The advisory also added warnings for Chiapas and Veracruz. This means that 23 of Mexico’s 31 states are under a US government advisory.

The concerns about security at tourist sites have been around for at least the past decade ([SourceMex, Jan. 14, 2009](#), [March 11, 2009](#), [Feb. 13, 2013](#)). Violent confrontations among several criminal organizations have had a negative impact on tourism in places like Acapulco, particularly since the violence has spilled over to beaches and other popular tourist areas ([SourceMex, Feb. 8, 2006](#), [Sept. 28, 2011](#), [April 20, 2016](#)).

A ‘worrisome’ alert for Quintana Roo

The new US advisory comes at a time when the number of US visitors to Mexico is steadily increasing—up by about 11% so far this year, according to Tourism Secretary Enrique de la Madrid Cordero.

A document published by DataTur, the unit of the tourism ministry (Secretaría de Turismo, SECTUR) that collects information on trends, said two-thirds of the US tourists who visited Mexico in 2016 traveled to Cancún or Mexico City.

“That is why the advisory posted by the US State Department is so worrisome, both for the tourism industry and for Quintana Roo state,” Carlos Tello Díaz, an expert on Latin America and the Caribbean at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), said in a guest piece in the daily newspaper Milenio. “The majority of the foreigners who visited Cancún last year, about 70%, came from the US.”

The impact of the advisory, while applicable to many areas of Mexico, is especially damaging to Quintana Roo, where tourism accounts for about 85% of the state's annual GDP. Two of the state's resorts have the highest rate of hotel occupancy in Mexico—Riviera Maya at 86% and Cancún at 82%

Hotel occupancy rates have continued to increase during the summer months in Quintana Roo, which is also a popular destination for domestic visitors. "The average hotel occupancy in Quintana Roo has increased 3.5% so far this year to reach 93.2% by the close of the summer season," columnist Carlos Velázquez wrote in the daily newspaper *Excelsior* at the end of August. "This is an impressive trend found in very few other tourist resorts around the world."

Additionally, Marisol Vanegas Pérez, the tourism secretary in Quintana Roo, recently reported that an additional 10,000 hotel rooms are under construction in the state. "This is further evidence of the tourism boom," Velázquez said.

Vanegas and other Quintana Roo tourism officials note that the number of murders involving tourists in the past four years has been extremely small. "We have hosted 60 million tourists, including cruise passengers in the past four years, or about 15 million annually," Venegas Pérez said in an interview. "During this period, there have only been 10 incidents of homicide involving foreign tourists."

Only two of the 10 homicides of foreign tourists between 2012 and 2016 involved US citizens, she said.

Others suggest that the State Department's advisory for Quintana Roo might not have a dampening effect on the number of tourists who visit the state. "While Quintana Roo's advisory is now stricter, [the state] isn't included among the most dangerous spots in Mexico, where US government personnel are told to defer non-essential travel," said Bloomberg news service "That restriction is reserved for parts of Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Colima states, among others."

The impact of the advisory will not be apparent for some time. According to the business organization Confederación Patronal de la República Mexicana (COPARMEX), the advisory will likely affect bookings this winter, which is a popular time for US visitors to travel to the region.

COPARMEX, which represents more than 200 hotels, restaurants, and other tourist-oriented businesses in Cancún, reports that security has begun to improve following a series of violent incidents earlier this year. However, recent news reports point to the contrary. During the week after the US State Department released its stricter warning for Quintana Roo, several violent incidents were reported in Playa del Carmen and in Cancún. An attempted murder created a chaotic situation in the heart of the tourist district in Playa del Carmen on the Wednesday after the US warning was released. The following day, suspects carried out a brazen armed robbery at a Playa del Carmen jewelry store in broad daylight. "This was a spectacular event that occurred in full view of the tourists who were walking through the area," said the daily newspaper *La Jornada Maya*.

"While those things were occurring in Playa del Carmen, the wave of executions seemed unstoppable in Cancún," said *La Jornada Maya*. "A man was executed in a motel very early Friday morning on Avenida López Portillo, an attempted murder was recorded an hour later in the nearby neighborhood, and a person was executed in the Valle Verde neighborhood."

While those three events took place away from the main tourist area of Cancún, they contributed to the environment of insecurity that prevails in the city.

Some observers noted that crime has long been a problem in Quintana Roo but that former Gov. Roberto Borge understated and manipulated the crime statistics in the state, which masked the extent of the problem. In contrast, current Gov. Carlos Joaquín González provided accurate data on crime, which US consular authorities used to put together the updated advisory for Quintana Roo. "This apparent increase in reported crime incidents was precisely why the US government created the new travel alert," Velázquez wrote in *Excélsior*.

'An opportunity to improve'

The federal government also acknowledges that drug-related violence, particularly confrontations between criminal organizations, is becoming a problem in the popular resort communities in Quintana Roo as well as in other popular destinations for foreigners. These include resorts and cultural sites in the states of Baja California, Baja California Sur, Chiapas, Colima, Guerrero, and Veracruz.

"We are concerned about this piece of bad news and the impact that it could have on the sector, which has recently performed well and has continued to create jobs," de la Madrid said shortly after the State Department issued its new advisory. "We have to view this as an opportunity to improve."

The tourism secretary acknowledged earlier that the Mexican government is worried about a spike of violence in areas frequented by foreign visitors, particularly Quintana Roo.

"Our most important challenge in the tourism sector is security," de la Madrid acknowledged in an address to participants at a tourism forum in Buenos Aires in April. "We have ways to address this problem, working closely with governors and the private sector."

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