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Mexico Reports Robust Results for Tourism Industry in 2017

by Carlos Navarro

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Mexico ranked among the top destinations for foreign visitors in 2017, despite the continuation of violence and insecurity in some areas and the impact of natural disasters, including two earthquakes that hit tourist areas and the Mexican capital in September.

Full statistics are not yet available for 2017, but data provided by the tourism promotion council (Consejo de Promoción Turística de México, CPTM) indicates that 28.6 million foreigners traveled to Mexico between January and September of 2017, an increase of 9.6% from the same period in 2016. If the pace continued for October to December, the numbers would surpass the total of 35 million visitors attained in 2016, when Mexico ranked eighth globally in terms of foreign visitors, according to an index published by the UN-affiliated World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

According to the CPTM, informal data indicates that Mexico had the numbers to boost its ranking to seventh place in 2017, although no formal data has been published by the UNWTO for last year. Germany ranked seventh on the index in 2016, with the 35.6 foreign visitors arriving in the European country that year. Ahead of Germany and Mexico are France, the US, Spain, China, Italy, and Great Britain.

The tourism ministry (Secretaría de Turismo, SECTUR) believes that Mexico surpassed the totals for 2016 by a significant margin. “According to estimates from the central bank (Banco de México, BANXICO) and numbers from Datatur [the agency that tracks tourism statistics], the number of foreign visitors to Mexico reached 38.8 million,” said Tourism Secretary Enrique de la Madrid. “That would represent an increase of 50% relative to 2012, a year when 23.4 million foreigners visited Mexico.”

According to de la Madrid, Mexico has certain advantages that attract foreign visitors, including 28 sites designated as World Heritage Sites by the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). These include the agave growing region in western Mexico and the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere in the central region ([SourceMex, July 19, 2006](#), and [July 9, 2008](#)).

Earthquakes limited activity

Despite the rosy reports from Mexican tourism officials, critics suggest that the impact of two earthquakes—along with more than 4,400 aftershocks—on the industry should not be ignored. The first earthquake, whose epicenter was in the Pacific Ocean off Chiapas, caused major damage to many areas of southern Mexico, including resort communities in Oaxaca ([SourceMex, Sept. 13, 2017](#)). The second earthquake, at the end of September, caused most of its damage to Mexico City and surrounding areas ([SourceMex, Sept. 27, 2017](#)).

According to the travel agents' association Asociación Mexicana de Agencias de Viajes (AMAV), occupancy rates in the capital dropped to about 50% after the second earthquake, compared with a normal rate of 66% for the end of September. However, the cancellations did not affect major

resorts outside of the capital, including popular sites like Cancún, Puerto Vallarta, Los Cabos, and Acapulco, the AMAV noted.

Hotel operators in the capital pointed out that very few properties sustained damage from the quake. Of about 300 major hotels in the Mexican capital, only seven sustained any sort of structural damage, and another 15 required an inspection. None of these 22 hotels was located in the areas most frequented by tourists, industry sources said.

Violence remains a concern

A bigger worry for the tourism industry is the continued violence in some parts of Mexico, including some areas that were previously considered generally safe, such as the Riviera Maya, Cancún, and Los Cabos. US visitors account for a large number of foreign tourists in the three resorts. In August 2017, the US State Department issued an updated travel advisory warning US citizens and residents to exercise caution when traveling to the state of Quintana Roo, where the resort areas of Cancún, Cozumel, Playa del Carmen, Riviera Maya, and Tulum are located. 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 ([SourceMex, Aug. 30, 2017](#)).

These warnings raised concerns among hotel operators in the resort communities. “There are travel agents in the US who are nervous about sending their clients to Mexico, especially business and executive travelers,” said Alejandro Zozaya, director general for Apple Leisure Group, which operates luxury hotels in Los Cabos.

The US, Canada, and Britain issued updated travel advisories at the beginning of January, emphasizing the need for their citizens to avoid areas of Mexico where criminal organizations remain strong. The US State Department urged US citizens to completely avoid the states of Colima, Michoacán, Sinaloa, Tamaulipas, and Guerrero. The “do not travel” directive for these states is the same one that the US uses for the war-torn countries of Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

“Armed groups operate independently of the government in many areas of Guerrero. Members of these groups frequently maintain roadblocks and may use violence toward travelers,” the State Department said.

The Canadian government issued a similar warning, urging its citizens to exercise caution when traveling to the northern states of Chihuahua, Coahuila (except Saltillo), Durango, Nuevo León (except Monterrey), Sinaloa (except Mazatlán), Sonora (except Hermosillo and Guaymas-San Carlos) and Tamaulipas.

“In northern Mexico, particularly along the border with the United States, organized crime and urban violence greatly affect security. Confrontations between organized criminal groups and Mexican authorities continue to pose a problem,” said the advisory, explaining that “shootouts, attacks, and illegal roadblocks may occur without warning.”

The document urges Canadians to avoid all non-essential travel to the western states of Guerrero and Michoacán due to high levels of violence and activity by criminal organizations. The advisory excluded the cities of Acapulco, Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo, Taxco, and Morelia.

The Canadian government also issued cautionary advisories for the states of Colima, Jalisco, and Nayarit, citing high levels of criminal activity. The advisory also mentioned Baja California Sur and

Quintana Roo. Even though criminal organizations do not target tourists, violence related to clashes among criminal organizations has been on the rise in the two states, said the advisory.

The British government, too, warned its citizens. But rather than urging them to avoid certain areas, it advised they take extra care when traveling to some parts of Mexico. Similar to the alerts issued by the US and Canada, Britain's warning pays special attention to the states of Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, and Durango.

De la Madrid raised concerns about the travel alerts.

"We don't think it's right that they should be issuing such alerts regarding travel to our country, because they stigmatize, confuse, and damage our tourist sector," the tourism secretary said. "They also are harmful to the US hotel chains, which conduct significant business in our country."

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