

Mexico: Despite Violence, Still Safe

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Travel Agent Breaks Down Recent Violence in Mexico and Why We Feel It is Still Safe

Not since Hurricane Wilma wiped out [Cancun](#)'s resorts and infrastructure in 2005 has [Mexico](#) dealt with a public-relations disaster as bad as the one it is battling now.



Mexico's government is taking stronger precautions to keep travel safe for visitors, from Mexico City to resort destinations

Whereas nature disrupted Mexico tourism roughly four years ago, its crime—and the nonstop coverage of it—is giving the country a bad name in 2009.

Agent Advice

With constant layoffs coupled with bad news coming out of Mexico, now is the time to push insurance harder than you've ever pushed it. This way, your clients can cancel and you will still profit.

"We always recommend that clients buy travel insurance from us through our wholesaler travel partners or through one of our independent travel insurance companies, but I will say that normally less than 25

percent of them do," Cyndy Nordyke of Smart Price Travel in Irving, TX, says. "If a client buys the 'cancel for any reason' insurance, then it is easy for them to cancel and move their trip somewhere else.

"My husband is also a travel agent and we love Mexico and all it has to offer with all the education, culture, history, beaches, culinary experiences and the resorts," Nordyke adds. "The thought of not being able to go there due to the violence would be very disappointing to us personally, to our clients and for our travel partners in the country."

But is it really unsafe or has the media blown this way out of proportion? How do you convince your clients that Mexico is still a viable option in the wake of [violent murders by drug gangs](#)?

There have been reports of gruesome crimes committed by Mexican gangs near the U.S. border (which is not, incidentally, considered a tourist site) and then there's the simple, "[U.S. Department of State Issues Travel Alert to Mexico](#)" alert, which followed shortly thereafter.

The alert, which can linger on the State Department's site for as long as a year in some cases, says, "While millions of U.S. citizens safely visit Mexico each year (including thousands who cross the land border every day for study, tourism or business), violence in the country has increased recently."

According to the Department of State, however, the greatest increase in violence has occurred near the U.S. border, a fact that is getting lost in the big picture. Alerts traditionally target an entire country, even if the violence is concentrated in one particular area. And here lies Mexico's greatest problem: The entire country has a stigma attached to it for violence committed in a very small portion of the country, most of which isn't even considered a tourist destination.

This was the first travel alert for Mexico in three years. Its last came in 2006 following a protest in Oaxaca, and before that, the aforementioned Hurricane Wilma.

"On both occasions, you will see that Mexico's federal government worked with local authorities and the private sector to make sure everything was not only back to normal, but better," Carlos Behnsen, executive director of the Mexico Tourism Board, told [Travel Agent](#). "Specifically, the Mexico Tourism Board worked in conjunction with our media partners, travel agents and tour operators to promote our reality: Mexico has many safe and wonderful destinations for Americans to visit. Last year, 18 million Americans visited Mexico, and even now, Cancun is at almost 90 percent capacity, which means Americans trust us with their vacations."

Putting It in Perspective

"Five Human Heads Found in Central Mexico"—it's hard to defend the safety of Mexico when you read a headline like this. Just about a month after the alert was issued, CNN reported that [five human heads were found in ice chests](#) under a ficus tree in the central Mexican state of Jalisco. Police discovered the heads beside a road to Guadalajara.

Let's put the brutality of this crime aside for a second and look at the tourism aspect. Of all the stories of violence that have come out of Mexico lately, not many included tourist destinations. Then Cancun became the site of a discovery of dead police officers, followed by this gruesome discovery in Guadalajara. Mexico could no longer hide behind blaming U.S. border towns and now had to come to grips that the violence was indeed spreading. The tourism board attempted some damage control by [issuing a release](#) stating Mexico's impressive tourism numbers as of late, but it still wasn't enough to convince people. So how does an agent convince someone Mexico is safe?

Understand Clients' Concerns

We've spoken to several Mexico specialists about this subject and it seems as though the common approach is to compare safety in Mexico with the crime rate of the city where the potential client lives.

Agent Adrienne Sasson of Rubensohn Travel in Jenkintown, PA, approaches the subject by asking the client what city they are from and what is the next major city that is nearby with a large population. "Then I'll ask if there are unsafe spots in these cities, and nine times out of 10, they will say, 'Well, I go here, but stay away from there; this place is safe but that place isn't.' And then they see that the place they are going to isn't any more unsafe than the areas they are coming from," Sasson says.

While we don't necessarily disagree with this approach, we also think it's appropriate to acknowledge that your client has every reason to be concerned. Pretend that you don't know the geography of Mexico as well as most Mexico specialists do. Pretend you are a casual traveler who doesn't know [Punta Mita](#) from [Punta Cana](#). For these people, Mexico doesn't seem all that big. So, instead of giving them a lesson on crime rates, give them a lesson on geography. Even pull out a map and show them exactly where the violent hot zones are in relation to the safer regions, like those in the [Riviera Maya](#) or Los Cabos.

"I love Mexico, and about 75 percent of my clients go to the Cancun/Riviera Maya/Playa Del Carmen area," says Cyndy Nordyke of Smart Price Travel in Irving, TX. "I always tell my clients that this is a foreign country and travelers should always use common sense and proper precautions when vacationing anywhere, including Mexico. Always be aware of your surroundings and stick to legitimate business and tourist areas and do not be out at night by yourself. The all-inclusive resorts like El Dorado Royale have very strong security and people do not get on the grounds without the proper identification. Clients should rest assured in these resorts compared to some of the hotels more in town."



To ensure the safety of tourists, Acapulco has committed to doubling resources

Reassuring Stats and Information

It should also be noted that in the client's mind, crime in the U.S. is different from crime in another country because here at home your clients are dealing with police, laws and regulations that they essentially grew up with their entire lives. When dealing with a crisis in another country, a client may encounter a language barrier or a set of laws with which they are unfamiliar. So you will have to convince them that the foreign police are looking out for them as much as their native police would.

Here are some stats and information provided by the Mexico Tourism Board's Behnsen that might help convince your clients that it is safe to travel in Mexico.

* Destinations such as [Acapulco](#) expect more than 22,000 American students for **Spring Break**, so the city has committed to doubling resources and efforts to [ensure that all tourist areas within the city remain clean and safeguarded](#) by law enforcement authorities. The police will be patrolling the streets and beaches around the clock.

* [Riviera Nayarit](#) has felt no need to invest in extra security as Nayarit is considered one of the safer states in the country with a very low crime rate, as per a study revealed by the **Research Center for Development**.

* **Los Cabos** remains largely unaffected by crime. The isolated setting protects Los Cabos from feeling the effects of political or social unrest that may occur in other areas of Mexico. In 2008, the State Government installed high-end security technology at all airports and roadways throughout Baja

California Sur, ensuring complete vehicle and passenger inspection upon entry to the state.

* The Mexican government is constantly working on ensuring the safety of its tourists and nationals. Not only are they working with emergency services to make sure they are prepared, but the government has placed more police officers and members of the army in locations deemed necessary.

* The government professionalized the Mexican police, who now have to go through background checks, lie detectors and more rigorous training. There have also been investments in more sophisticated communications equipment.

* The three levels of government are working together at the destinations to secure the safety of their tourists by strengthening the vigilance at the resorts and nightclubs.

Armed with this knowledge, you'll be ready to reassure your clients interested in a trip to Mexico.