

Trying to bring back Baja's tourists



January 6, 2012 | Photo by John Gibbins

Juan Tintos

Title: Secretary of tourism, Baja California

Personal: Age 52, born in Tijuana, married with two sons, one daughter

Education: Graduate of University of Baja California with a degree in tourism

Professional career: Assistant director of Tijuana Cultural Center in the 1980s; secretary of tourism from 1992 to 2001; CEO of a Baja California-based travel and hotel corporation. Returned to tourism secretary post in September of 2010.

Baja tourism by the numbers

361: Cruise ship arrivals in 2008

169: Cruise ship arrivals in 2011

25.1 million: International visitors to Baja in 2008

24.2 million: International visitors to Baja in 2009

24.8 million: International visitors to Baja in 2010

Source: Port captain's office in Ensenada, Banco de Mexico

When Juan Tintos returned in 2010 to his old post as Baja California's tourism secretary following a nine-year hiatus, he faced a daunting challenge: reviving the state's ailing tourism industry, stricken by persistent fears related to drug wars and crime.

Today, Tintos is bullish about Baja California's prospects for much more robust tourism, fueled in part by growth in spending among tourists living in Mexico, as well as Hispanics north of the border.

Although tourism spending and visitors have dropped considerably from early in the last decade, those numbers are starting to climb back from the depths of 2009, Tintos hastens to point out.

For starters, his office sought out a public relations agency to help the state channel the mindset of American tourists. In addition, an “image committee” of expatriates was convened to zero in on redefining the public’s perception of Baja.

In San Diego recently, Tintos spoke about his strategy for energizing tourism on a number of fronts that he hopes will convince Americans once again that Baja California is a compelling place to visit.

Question: In the wake of a difficult decade for tourism in Baja California, what specific initiatives have you taken to induce more people to cross the border for getaways and vacations?

Answer: We did a perception survey last March in eight Southern California destinations. They had heard about good things happening but still had some reservations about coming. There’s still a need to provide accurate information (and clear up) misinformation. This is my 18th trip to California, Arizona and Nevada. Besides the Anglo and growing Hispanic market, we’re focusing on our domestic market.

Before this whole situation, I would say tourism expenditures in Baja were about two-thirds Americans or foreigners. That fell to one-third at its worst. So now we’re at 60 percent from the national market (within Mexico), but we’re not out of the woods yet.

Q: Rather rely strictly on the tourist traffic of the past — Americans heading to Baja California beaches — what new niches are you exploring to boost tourism revenue?

A: You have the largest concentration of maquiladora plants, and that generates business tourists who come and stay two, three nights. We’ve also grown in medical tourism. We have 450,000 people, mostly from California, mostly Hispanics, who come to Baja for dentistry, eye care, cosmetic surgery, and that generate \$86 million a year. We have a calendar of over 300 events, and more than half are sports like the Rosarito-to-Ensenada bike ride.

Q: How important has the region’s culinary boom and maturing of its wine region, Valle de Guadalupe, been in boosting visits from San Diegans?

A: This year we doubled the number of events in the wine region. We’ve had 4,000 to 6,000 people at concerts. Instead of the Bullring by the Sea, people prefer to be in that area surrounding by beautiful scenery. Another thing that has helped is the famous Baja Med cuisine. We just had the baja culinary festival in October where we had 29 events in five days and chefs from the U.S., Europe and South America. And the federal government is going to launch 10 tourist routes, and the wine region will be one of them.

Q: San Diego’s cruise ship industry has suffered a huge setback as more and more ships have pulled out of Southern California that were formerly going to the Mexican Riviera. The lines said they did so because of the crime issue and lack of diversity of ports. What is Baja California doing to entice the cruise lines to return?

A: Yes, the verdict was that the Mexican Riviera was tired and needed to be rejuvenated. We did a study that told us you have to have more attractions and better presentation of your destination, train your taxi drivers, look for more genuine arts and crafts.

We eliminated the tugboat fee (that was assessed) whether you used it or not. We're putting in a new sewer treatment plant at La Bufadora. We've got the Chamber of Commerce and association of merchants to make sure that only authentic merchandise is sold. We don't want tourists to go back unsatisfied. We used to have 325 cruise ship arrivals a year. We reduced half of that, and we're working slowly on increasing that. There's an expression in Mexico: You don't know what you've had until you lose it."