

Despite the Hype, Mexico Is Indeed Safe for Tourists

HSI's Craig Morganson is working to dispel myths and repair damage to Mexican Tourism and its impact on travel companies

After an increase of violence among drug cartels and between drug cartels and Mexico officials in 2010, the U.S. Department of State issued the first in a series of Travel Warnings against Mexico. According to the April 22, 2011 Warning, its purpose was to “inform U.S. Citizens traveling to and living in Mexico about the security situation in Mexico.” The Travel Warning goes on to claim that “While most victims of violence are Mexican citizens associated with criminal activity, the security situation poses serious risks for U.S. citizens as well.” Unfortunately, and at great expense to both the U.S. and Mexico, these statements are inflammatory.

So, in October 2011, Perspective Magazine interviewed Craig Morganson, CEO of Holiday Systems International (HSI) – and an active proponent of clearing up the misinformation – about the situation in Mexico.

What exactly is the current status?

As of this interview, the Travel Warning is still in place; however, as a result of a brief I presented in August, the Travel Warning status is being reviewed. But that's not enough, so everyone reading this should help.

How would you assess the actual dangers to U.S. citizens, especially in comparison with travel to other nations or even within the United States?

First, Mexico is the number one vacation destination for U.S. citizens with approximately 20 million visitors every year enjoying safe, affordable, luxurious, friendly vacations. That's hard to argue with. Mexico is safe for US Citizens. This statement is also supported by an undeniable volume of data from reliable sources, not the least of which are crime statistics. For example, while the State Department cites 111 murders of U.S. citizens in Mexico in 2010, this number must be viewed in proper context (e.g. 111 deaths of U.S. citizens against approximately 20 million



U.S. citizens visiting Mexico, and an additional 1 million living in Mexico). Furthermore, it is important to note that these U.S. citizen crimes did not occur in major tourist areas, and the majority of these U.S. citizens were involved in illicit activities.

Additionally, when comparing Mexico crime to other countries, we see that Mexico is safer. For example, when considering crime per 100,000 inhabitants we see the following: Mexico is only 5th in kidnapping (1-Canada: 8.67, 5-Mexico: 1.2), only 7th in rape (1-South Africa: 120, 3-Canada: 73, 4-USA: 30, 7-Mexico: 14), only 6th in assault (1-South Africa: 1,200, 2-USA: 757, 3-Canada: 712, 6-Mexico: 170), and so on. Therefore, the facts demonstrate that Mexico is safer than many other countries where the State Department has NOT issued a Travel Warning.

New Orleans, Detroit, St. Louis, Baltimore, Newark, Oakland, Washington D.C., Buffalo, Kansas City and Cleveland are just a few of the many U.S. cities with much higher murder

rates than most Mexico cities and that are far more dangerous than the major tourist areas of Mexico.

What are some of the specific inaccuracies within the Travel Warning?

You wouldn't have room to list them all, but I can name a few. One of the most viewed public-facing documents is the “Current Travel Warnings” section of the government website. Using language within that policy demonstrates the warning against Mexico is not justified:

- The criteria of “long-term, protracted conditions” cannot be justified against Mexico's sporadic increases in violence.
- The statement “...that make a country dangerous or unstable lead the State Department to recommend that Americans avoid or consider the risk of travel to that country” does not apply to Mexico. The entire “country” of Mexico is NOT impacted. Violence is limited to specific areas, and not

major tourist destinations.

- The criteria of "...due to the closure of an embassy or consulate or because of a drawdown of its staff" does not apply to Mexico. No embassy or consulate has closed in Mexico due to these reasons.
- In reviewing EVERY area where the U.S. has issued a Travel Warning, there is a large disparity between our friendly neighbor (Mexico) and all others. In fact, this discrepancy is so extreme the blatancy of it needs no explanation. For example, Haiti, Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, etc.
- When viewing the listing for Israel, the warning clarifies (within the listing) its limitation to "the West Bank and Gaza"; however, the listing for Mexico is not clarified, despite the fact that the violence is limited to specific areas. This leaves the reader to unfairly assume the entire country of Mexico is dangerous.
- New Orleans is the most deadly city in the U.S. with 52-64 murders per 100,000 populations (depending on the source). When considering the overreaching nature of the Travel Warning, the impact is similar to not visiting Miami because of the violence in New Orleans.

Why are the warnings so severe then?

This is something my brief deals with in more detail. For now, let's just say the Travel Warning against Mexico is a case of overreaction, leveraging of tourism to manipulate Mexico, and flawed economics.

How do the warnings impact U.S. businesses?

Mexico is the number one vacation destination for U.S. citizens, generating hundreds of millions in revenues for travel and tourism business throughout the U.S. The Travel Warnings against Mexico have caused U.S. businesses to experience significant reductions in revenues. This revenue is often the deciding factor in keeping the doors open for many U.S. businesses. In Nevada alone, consider that In July of 2011, of the 182 businesses identified as providing travel to Mexico, 111 had recently gone out of business and 7 companies no longer provided travel to Mexico. To quantify this nationwide, I am currently engaging a research company to conduct a more detailed impact analysis.

How do they affect the Mexican economy?

The Travel Warning continues to deprive Mexico of income and tax revenue from tourism. Law enforcement is expensive and with a diminished tax base Mexico is forced to



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fight the U.S. drug war with fewer resources.

What have you been doing to change Mexico's status?

I've had numerous meetings with high-ranking U.S. Government officials regarding the Mexico Travel Warning. I've also prepared a 76-page brief that is currently gaining ground in Washington. The arguments presented in my brief include crime statistics, economic impact, policy conflict and specific actions that are reasonable to execute. The bottom line is that there is violence in Mexico, just as there is in Los Angeles, and I am not suggesting that we do not inform U.S. citizens of this fact. What I am saying, is that this information is more appropriately disseminated through a less severe Travel Advisory (e.g., Country Specific Information) and that the language within the information be changed to be less overreaching and ambiguous.

Tell me about why you are involved in this. What are your goals?

I own several travel/tourism companies. The U.S. is currently struggling to recover from the worst economy in my lifetime. Travel and tourism is a big part of our global economy. The long-term economic damage caused by the U.S. Travel Warning against Mexico is greater than the benefits derived from the Warning. The State Department can accomplish its objectives by issuing details within its Country Specific Information, thereby

properly cautioning U.S. citizens regarding specific areas and risks, while not injuring important economic balances, which is the result of the more serious nature of a Travel Warning. In fact, while the U.S. Travel Warning has been detrimental to the U.S. economy, the Mexico economy, and countless U.S. businesses, there is no evidence it has saved one U.S. citizen's life. While we teeter on the brink of a global recession, the State Department needs to be more responsible when issuing Travel Advisories that hinder our economic recovery, yet do not save lives.

What can individual travel companies and organizations do to help?

Anyone who would like to assist me with the cost of the research I've been funding can contact me at ceo@holidaysystems.com. Also, write letters to your Congressmen, Senators, etc. – but don't just complain. Get their attention by demonstrating the economic impact within their constituency. Talk about jobs and votes, but also include intelligent arguments for the Travel Warning reduction so they can escalate your issue. Make it easy for them to help you. In most cases, they're not going to know anything about the issue, so educate them. Any reader that would like a copy of my brief can contact me. If you're not sure where to send your letters, send them to the Senate Majority Leader Senator Harry Reid, 522 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510. 