

Las Vegas Sun

**Travel:**

# Mexican officials hit road to promote Baja tourism

## Peninsula is safe, full of attractions, Las Vegas group told

By [Tovin Lapan](#) ([contact](#))

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Hugo Torres, the former mayor of Rosarito Beach, Mexico, is on a mission to “replace fear with facts” and again lure U.S. tourists to his beloved [Baja California](#).

Torres and Juan Tintos, Baja California’s secretary of tourism, were in Las Vegas on Thursday as part of their tour across the Southwestern United States, spreading the word that the Mexican state just south of San Diego is full of great spas, wineries, restaurants, beaches and other attractions.

Thanks to increased border security, travel advisories from the U.S. government and negative perceptions of ongoing violence from drug cartels built over years, U.S. tourists are not traveling south of the border at the same rate as before the Mexican drug war caught the attention of international media.

While violence does exist in Baja California, it rarely touches the state’s tourism community, Torres and Tinto told the [Las Vegas chapter of the American Marketing Association](#) during a presentation at [Bali Hai Golf Club](#).

The number of tourists entering Mexico by plane hit 22.7 million in 2011, the most ever, according to statistics released in February by the [Bank of Mexico](#). Yet, air travel to Mexico from the United States dropped 3 percent last year. The gains came from other countries such as Brazil, Russia, Peru and China.

Torres said that as news of the war between Mexican authorities and rival drug cartels spread in 2008, tourism from the United States to Baja fell off a cliff — 70 percent, to be exact. Torres said the region had since recovered about 20 percent of that figure.

“The city of Rosarito had its lowest crime rate ever in 2010, but that is not the perception in the United States,” Torres said. “People hear about violence in Juarez and the thought is that all of Mexico is dangerous. Americans don’t know Mexican geography.”

Torres also pointed to long border waits to re-enter the United States and a new regulation mandating U.S. citizens have passports to visit Mexico that took effect in 2010 as deterrents to increased tourism.

One Las Vegas travel adviser acknowledged wariness about travel to Mexico.

“We are getting a lot of questions on safety in Mexico, and I would say we didn’t see as many college students asking about Mexico for spring break as we used to see,” said Donna Steele, a [AAA Travel](#) counselor. “There is a reticence to go to Mexico. People are wary, and I think parents have been telling their kids, ‘No,’ when it comes to Mexico.”

Steele and other travel agents in Las Vegas said they discouraged travel to border areas, including Tijuana, but have generally told their clients that most tourist areas, including Cancun, Puerto Vallarta and Mexico City, are safe to visit.

The most recent [U.S. State Department travel advisory on Mexico](#), issued in February, cautions against travel to northern, but not southern, Baja and 18 other states.

“You should exercise caution in the northern state of Baja California, particularly at night. Targeted TCO (Transnational Criminal Organization) assassinations continue to take place in Baja California. Turf battles between criminal groups proliferated and resulted in numerous assassinations in areas of Tijuana frequented by U.S. citizens. ... During 2011, 34 U.S. citizens were the victims of homicide in the state. In the majority of these cases, the killings appeared to be related to narcotics trafficking,” the advisory states.

Tintos said he had met with U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and had discussed the travel advisory.

“We told him what goes around comes around,” said Tintos, who estimated that Nevada sends the third highest amount of U.S. tourists to Baja after Arizona and California. “If they lift the advisory and we get more tourists, then our economy will be healthier. In turn, our residents will have the money to visit the United States.”

The new campaign includes video testimonials from U.S. citizens and celebrities who live in and visit the Baja peninsula. The state hired a U.S. public relations firm and is touting attractions like wineries, top-flight restaurants, bicycle and automobile races, fishing and surfing. The campaign also involves the “road show,” which visited 18 U.S. cities last year and has already landed in six in 2012.

The Mexican state also is promoting its film industry. The largest water tank in the world for use in filmmaking is in northern Baja — James Cameron sank the Titanic there — and several films are made in Baja each year. If Baja is safe enough for Hollywood, the thinking goes, it should be safe enough for U.S. tourists.

In one testimonial, [celebrity chef Rick Bayless](#) talks about filming an entire season of his show in Baja.

“I encourage everybody to come and explore,” Bayless says.

Other initiatives the state has advanced and is promoting to prospective tourists are new border crossings and improvements at existing ones, an “enhanced” California driver’s license that would allow holders to use that for U.S. re-entry in place of a passport, development of convention centers and resources for large events in the region, and medical tourism.

Rafael Villanueva of the [Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority](#) attended the presentation Thursday and said he was open to collaborative efforts that would draw more tourists from Mexico to Las Vegas and vice versa. Measuring the market is problematic, he said, because those who drive from Tijuana to Las Vegas most likely enter in San Diego and are counted as Southern California visitors.

“We’ve never negated the fact that there’s violence,” Tintos said after his presentation. “It is just like any other tourist destination in the world; you have to take precautions and be smart. I was mugged in Philadelphia. It can happen anywhere. ... We have a lower crime rate than many U.S. cities.”



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