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Sun still shines in Mexico

Article by: ANNE Z. COOKE, Special to the Star Tribune | Updated: March 17, 2012 - 6:11 PM

Amid safety concerns, a traveler to Mazatlan finds little to fear and much to love.



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Al fresco lunch and dinner on the Plaza Machado, in the historic center, Mazatlan, Mexico.

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As a frequent traveler to Mexico, I'm a self-confessed fan and incurable junkie.

Once I got Mexico in my head (as a grade schooler visiting with my parents), memories of its warmhearted people, colorful arts and crafts, tantalizing food, balmy sunshine and ancient history set my senses tingling. I am not alone. Millions of Americans vacation south of the border each year.

For my most recent fix, I decided to go to Mazatlan, in the state of Sinaloa, on the sugary sands of the Pacific. But the trip, timed to coincide with the city's Day of the Dead revelries, was more mission

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than vacation. In the face of travel warnings about Mexico, I wanted some answers to painful questions: How dangerous is the country? Are drug gangs staying clear of tourist areas, such as Mazatlan's Zona Rosa, the beachside district designed to host visitors? Would the precautions I follow in every large city keep me safe here?

It turns out that my destination was a prime spot to ponder such things. The most recent U.S. State Department travel warning about Mexico -- issued Feb. 7, months after my return -- says "you should exercise caution" in Mazatlan. It calls Sinaloa home to one of the most powerful "transnational criminal organizations" (aka a drug cartel). Even as I headed to Mazatlan, I knew there were safety concerns.

Waiting in the airport lounge I found myself sitting next to Kurt Miller, a jolly fifty-something man from Oregon who laughed when I asked him if he felt unsafe. "That's what all my friends want to know," he said. "But we don't know anyone who's had any kind of problems. We love our house and we've got great neighbors. Here, take a look," he added, pulling out his computer to show me photos of his abode in Mazatlan's El Cid Marina and snaps of him on his bicycle, posing on the city's beachfront walk.

I'm glad I went to see for myself. This port city's sandy beaches are broad and clean, the water is warm and the surf rolls onto the beach in waves gentle enough for children. I could hardly wait to change into a bathing suit and plunge into it myself. Along the Malecon, the sea wall, an assortment of new and old hotels share ocean views with restaurants, shrimp shacks, shops and offices. It's too perfect a spot to turn over to the drug lords.

Stay alert, take precautions

In the Plaza Machado, a few blocks inland, enterprising Americans and Mexicans have invested in the historic downtown, restoring and painting colonial structures still standing after 150 years. Newly planted trees and flower gardens shade park benches. Artists and artisans have opened studios and set up shop in ground-floor spaces.

I spent a day there, peeking into quiet courtyards and touring the recently restored Teatro de Angela Peralta (also known as the Opera House). In the ballet studio next door, 21 teenage girls and one boy in toe shoes were at the barre, practicing their routines. As the pianist banged out a tune, the maestro herself went from one to the next, raising a leg higher there and arching an arm here. The scene was the soul of tranquility.

But even there, it's smart to stay alert.

No matter where I travel, from Paris to Buenos Aires and New York City, I don't walk alone at night or hang out in seedy joints. I stay in busy, well-lit neighborhoods, and I leave at the first whiff of drugs. The same precautions kept me safe in Mazatlan.

When I investigated some of the city's recent crimes, the facts suggested that many victims took a chance. Some were walking alone in a bad neighborhood or buying drugs. Some were partying in a crowded bar, or driving alone on deserted rural roads. But the headlines of innocent victims missed those details. It's no wonder dread permeates the public debate, leaving travelers anxious.

"It's safe here in the Zona Rosa," said Ruben Salazar, a waiter at the El Cid Marina Hotel, one of a dozen people I talked to during my week in Mazatlan. "But Sinaloa is famous for its mountains, where anybody can hide. I wouldn't go there. I live 20 minutes away and I drive to work at 5 o'clock in the morning. The road is empty, but I've never had trouble."

Miller, part of the large American community here, was reassuring. But he didn't dampen my sense of outrage. It's drug users in the United States who've created Mexico's crime wave. The sellers and users on our side of the border are the ones fueling the killings and violence, and turning Mexico's common toughs into billionaire czars.

Classic Mexican delights

During my tour of Mazatlan, I stopped by the fish market, where shrimp -- caught in the early morning and sold before noon -- was heaped in ice-filled buckets next to Pacific lobsters and crabs.

Wandering through the Zocalo (the old-town square) and its gardens, I walked around the bandstand, snapped photos and had my shoes shined by a man with a step-stool, polish and brushes. After touring the newly painted cathedral -- decorated in elaborate Mexican fashion -- I crossed the street to the open-air Central Market, still housed in the original 19th-century iron arcade. There, a broad range of items are sold, from fabrics, straw hats and kitchenware to vegetables, fruit, slabs of beef and whole chickens hanging by the feet.

When I had the chance, I asked people if they felt safe.

"I have to live," said Salazar, shrugging his shoulders. "I have an 8-year-old son. He plays baseball, and I take him two nights a week to tournaments. We don't worry."

(the sea wall), beside the Pacific Ocean, ...
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Stunt divers in Mazatlan, Mexico.
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Of the many people I met, it was the Alvaros, a retired Mexican couple from Guadalajara staying in their condominium near my room in the El Cid Marina Hotel, who said it best. "Yes, safety is a concern for some," said José Alvaro. "But not when you visit a place like this where people are on vacation. ... You shouldn't worry. Gangsters want to avoid the police."

Anne Z. Cooke lives in Marina del Rey, Calif., with her husband, photographer Steve Haggerty.

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