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Mazatlan Mexico: an easy place to lose your heart

2012-04-29 04:12:56



Steve Haggerty

The coastline sweeps northward in Mazatlan, Mexico.

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By Anne Z. Cooke / McClatchy-Tribune News Service

MAZATLAN, Mexico -- Mexico might seem a strange place to lose your heart.

But when you're young enough, that first encounter with our southern neighbor's warmth and charm -- the smell of roasting corn drifting from the sidewalk vendor's grill, the red and pink flowers drooping over adobe walls, vegetables piled high on tarps laid over the ground and women in multicolored shawls carrying jars on their heads -- changed my world view forever.

Mexico does that to people. Last year more than 15 million Americans crossed the border, searching for the perfect beach or shopping for handmade crafts. Some toured Mayan ruins; others simply were going to work. But with the U.S. State Department's recent travel advisories warning about the drug cartels and the continued violence, even I, an admitted addict, was worried.

Where is it most dangerous to be, and what can travelers do to stay safe? Can visitors to Mazatlan count on security if they book a hotel in the "Golden Zone" (Zona Rosa), the beachside district with hotels, restaurants and beach facilities developed specifically to accommodate visitors?

Waiting in the airport lounge, I found myself sitting next to Kurt Miller, a jolly 50-something man from Oregon who laughed when he heard my question. "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 house in the El Cid Marina and snaps of him on his bicycle, posing on Mazatlan's beachfront walk.

This port city's sandy beaches are broad and clean, the water is warm, and the surf rolls slowly up on the sand curling into tiny waves gentle enough for kids to play in. Changing into beachwear for a stroll along the Malecon -- the sea wall -- was near the top of my list. Drifting out to deep water was next.

If you go
Mazatlan, Mexico
Getting there: Mazatlan's airport is 40 minutes from the historic beach district.

Where to stay: The El Cid Marina Hotel, one of a half-dozen hotels on the coast, is at the north end of the Zona Rosa, near the marina. See www.elcid.com/marina_beach/.

Resources: Go to www.mazatlan.com or www.gomazatlan.com.

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I spent a day exploring the historic downtown, a square-mile area adjacent to the shore, where enterprising Americans and Mexicans have invested both money and time, restoring the colonial structures still standing after 150 years. Newly planted trees and flower gardens shade parks and benches. Artists and artisans have opened studios and set up shop in ground floor spaces.

After wandering through the Plaza Machado, sneaking looks into private courtyards, I peeked into the recently restored Teatro de Angela Peralta (you may know it as the Opera House), where Handel's "Messiah" was playing. In the ballet studio next door, 21 teenage girls and one boy in toe shoes were at the barre, practicing their routines.

Whether I'm traveling in Paris, Buenos Aires or New York City, I don't walk out alone at night or look for fun in seedy joints. I stay in busy, well-lit neighborhoods and leave at the first whiff of drugs. And when I investigated the details surrounding some of the recent crimes in Mazatlan, the facts suggested that some victims had been careless.

"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 interviewed. "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."

If you do go, remember to visit the Fish Market, where Mazatlan's signature shrimps -- caught in the early morning and sold before noon -- are heaped in ice-filled buckets next to Pacific lobsters and crabs. During the season, from September through January, shrimp dishes top the restaurant menus.

Wandering through the Zocalo (the old-town square) gardens, we walked around the bandstand, snapped photos and had our shoes shined by a man with a step-stool, polish and brushes. After touring the newly painted cathedral -- decorated as only Mexicans can -- we crossed the street to the open-air Central Market, still housed in the original 19th-century iron arcade. You can buy everything there, from fabrics, straw hats and kitchenware to vegetables, fruits, slabs of beef, and whole chickens hanging by the feet.

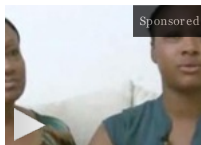
Of the many people I met, it was the Alvaros, a retired Mexican couple from Guadalajara -- staying in their own condominium near my room in the El Cid Marina Hotel -- who said it best about safety: "Yes, safety is a concern for some," said Jose Alvaro. "But not when you visit a place like this where people are on vacation ... But the criminals are bad for business, and I hope the government kills them all. You shouldn't worry. Gangsters want to avoid the police."

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