

# Is it safe to travel to Mexico? Judging from the numbers, many are saying 'Yes'

By Jayne Clark, USA TODAY

Despite tales of drug violence, visitation to Mexico was up almost 19% over last year, as of September. And with 22.6 million tourists expected by year's end, numbers will about equal the record-breaking totals in 2008. About 80% of visitors are North American.

In fact, slightly more foreigners are vacationing in Mexico now than before the drug wars, which have killed about 30,000 (mostly drug traffickers) in the past four years, *The Economist* reported in November. Mexico now ranks No. 10 in international arrivals worldwide.



The beach at Tulum, at the southern end of Mexico's Riviera Maya. Visitation to Mexico is up, despite concerns about drug violence.

By Paolo Corosso

I'm just back from San Miguel de Allende, a gorgeous colonial city in central Mexico (read about it Friday at [usatoday.com/travel](http://usatoday.com/travel)), where, not surprisingly, more than one conversation during my visit turned toward security concerns.

But not the sort of concerns you might think. The Americans I spoke with there were worried about the bum rap they believe the entire country is getting due to drug violence that, for the most part, is concentrated hundreds of miles away near the U.S. border.

"There is very little crime here, and what there is doesn't affect gringos," said Irina Posner, a retired CBS News employee and one of an estimated 12,000 to 14,000 ex-pats who live full or part-time in San Miguel. "We love this town. We feel *safe* in this town."

So did I, covering miles of narrow, cobbled walkways solo by day and by night in the 17th-century city. I felt as secure as I do in my own neighborhood, yet some innkeepers say they've had cancellations due to safety concerns.

Americans are notoriously near-sighted when it comes to geographical perspective. It's an issue Mexico's new tourism secretary Gloria Guevara addressed in an on-line seminar sponsored by the trade publication, *Travel Weekly*, last month. She acknowledged there are places in Mexico that tourists should avoid, specifically Matamoros and Ciudad Juarez on the Texas border. (And frankly, aside from those looking to do a cheap booze run, I'm not sure who would have frequented those border towns even before the drug-cartel bloodbaths).

"But for the rest of the country, you can relax and enjoy yourself," she told the *Travel Weekly* audience.

Actually, as someone who has traveled all over Mexico, I think I'd also skip Acapulco, which had a spate of nasty drug-related killings in September. But Acapulco many years ago ceased to be an American vacation destination.

Mexico's tourist sweet spot is Cancun, about 1,000 miles from Ciudad Juarez. Aside from an August bar shooting in a working-class neighborhood far removed from the resort zone, there has been no reported drug violence there. Another popular, earthier destination, is the Copper Canyon, which lies more than 200 miles from the border, or about the distance between New York and Baltimore.

"If you were planning a trip to New York, would you cancel it if you heard about challenges in Baltimore?" Guevara asked.

Vacation costs -- mainly hotels -- are down in Mexico. The average tourist spends about 5% less than in 2008, *The Economist* reports. And a number of forecasters are predicting that discounting in Cancun and south along the Riviera Maya will make that region particularly popular this winter.

(...) On Dec. 1, Southwest Airlines joined with Mexican carrier Volaris, allowing customers to travel on a single itinerary booked on Southwest. On Dec. 15, Alaska Airlines begins service between San Jose and Guadalajara, and from Sacramento on Dec. 16. On Feb. 10, American Eagle launches daily nonstop service from Dallas to Veracruz and Queretaro. And on Feb. 12, American begins seasonal service between Chicago and Cozumel.

How do you feel about vacationing in Mexico?

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