

## MEXICO ROMPS BACK INTO THE TOURISM GAME

Written By Christine Delsol – August 14, 2014



If you haven't visited Mexico lately, you might not recognize the place.

Though breathless stories of drug-related violence and empty hotels contributed to an extended tourism slump, reports of declining violence over the past two years and an increasingly robust economy have been sparse.

But Mexico hasn't been standing still.

President Enrique Peña Nieto invested heavily in tourism and has reaped steady rewards: The number of international travelers increased 10.9 percent in the first half of 2014 alone, compared with the same period in 2013. As the hysteria slowly ratchets down, U.S. travelers are joining the party; those numbers include a 13.1 percent boost in arrivals from the United States.

See Pages M4-M5 for what's been going on in some of our favorite destinations while you were gone.

### Caribbean coast

**Cancun:** The playground of the tanned and inebriated acquired an honest-to-goodness museum, the small but well-done Museo Maya de Cancun, in the wake of 2012's end-of-the-world furor.

The Cancun Underwater Museum, designed to become part of the marine environment, sank its final set of sculptures and opened a visitor center in Kukulcan Plaza.

Half the city has hotels going up, expanding, renovating or changing ownership. There's no keeping up with Mexican tourism's cash cow; just view it as a new destination every time you go.

Of note when you're deciding how to get there: Southwest Airlines launches daily nonstop flights to Cancun in November, and Alaska Airlines will resume seasonal service to Cancun after giving up the route in 2010. Super Shuttle is a new option for getting to Cancun or Riviera Maya resorts; its counter is inside the airport.

**Isla Mujeres:** Images of sea creatures have popped up all over the island's downtown streets. The "Sea Walls: Murals for Oceans" project installed the 15 huge images, created by a group of Mexican, U.S. and international street artists who prepared for their work by swimming with and studying manta rays and whale sharks.

The intention is to raise public awareness and support of marine conservation efforts by tourists as well as locals. All the Sea Walls murals, each displaying the artist's own distinct style, are mounted in the center of town so people can view them in an easy stroll.

**Riviera Maya:** Other than a riot of new construction that seemed inescapable no matter where I turned this spring, the standout development here is Maya Ka'an. Often described as a destination, it's actually an ecotourism program encompassing numerous settings in natural reserves and communities - including Muyil, Punta Allen and Felipe Carrillo Puerto - that border or lie within the wondrous Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve.

Maya Ka'an's primary goal is to protect and nourish the region's Maya communities and natural environments. For visitors, that means an array of adventure trips, guided by members of small tour companies and cooperatives, that range from kayaking and nature tours in the Sian Ka'an reserve to visits with healers, homemakers and fishing families in remote Maya villages.

It's an experiment in both sustainable natural resource use and bettering the lot of people who so far seen little benefit from Mexico's hundreds of millions of tourism dollars, and it deserves to succeed.

On a completely different note, a resident Cirque du Soleil company set up camp in a custom-designed theater this year at the Grand Mayan Resort, between Puerto Morelos and Playa del Carmen. Its elaborate show "Joya" opens in November.

Less inspiring, but interesting, is the Experiencias Xcaret group's latest theme park. Much like Vegas casinos, Xcaret attempts to re-create other places. Until now, it stuck with the Maya world (cenotes, jungle adventures, Chichen Itza ...). Its fifth park, Xoximilco, takes its inspiration (and name) from the Mexico City neighborhood that occupies a remnant of the ancient lake that became the Aztec capital.

Floating through the canals, having a long lunch and listening to mariachis is a treasured Sunday tradition in Mexico City. Cancun's Xoximilco also sends you through a series of canals on colorful,

gondola-like *trajineras*, plying you with drink, food and music, at a price comparable to the real thing.

### Gulf Coast

**Campeche:** Southern Campeche was all aflutter in late July, when President Peña Nieto came in to accept UNESCO's declaration of World Heritage status for the ancient Maya city and enormous biosphere reserve of Calakmul. The city itself - the largest Mexican ruin that most tourists never see - became a World Heritage Site in 2002.

The new declaration adds the southern part of the biosphere reserve, a 1.78 million-acre tropical forest ranking as the second-largest in the Americas. Calakmul is now Latin America's first "mixed natural and cultural" World Heritage site.

Calakmul could be dwarfed by a new discovery in the northern part of the biosphere reserve: an entire Maya city with pyramids, remnants of palace buildings, altars, ball courts and sculpted stelae.

Called Chactun, it consists of three distinct complexes that make up one of the largest cities in the Yucatan's central lowlands. Scientists believe Chactun might have been a government center, but work has barely begun at the site; no telling when it might open to the public.

### Pacific coast



**Mazatlán:** When escalating crime reports and a faltering economy prompted five major cruise lines to abandon this traditional Mexican Riviera mainstay, city and state officials instituted safety measures that led to a 90 percent drop in crime. First Holland America, then Norwegian Cruise Lines and Azamara Club Cruises, and now Princess Cruises and Carnival Cruise Lines have returned.

Even when the cruise ships were absent, Mazatlan continued work on a new tourism corridor between the port and the continually evolving Old Mazatlan, one of Mexico's sweetest colonial

centers. And about an hour north of town, the Institute of Anthropology and History created public access to one of Mexico's most intriguing and least-known archaeological sites.

Las Labradas doesn't have ancient pyramids, or any man-made structure except a new and very informative little museum. It's basically a big pile of black rocks on a lovely, nearly deserted beach. But these aren't any old rocks; as I started clambering about, they revealed themselves to be canvases for crazy carvings. Some were geometric forms looking curiously like engravings I've seen on Maya temples, while others took human or animal forms. One looked suspiciously like an alien.

Scientists say these petroglyphs, dating to 10,000 B.C., were left by the local Totorame Indians and are the precursor of symbols that led to writing. And that's about all they know, but research continues at Las Labradas National Park.

**Puerto Vallarta:** A renovated *malecon* that serves as art gallery, outdoor theater and universal front yard, along with a striking new pier impersonating a sailboat on lively Los Muertos Beach, have further boosted the appeal of this pretty port city.

Traditionally a magnet for gay travelers, it benefited from the recent Jalisco state law allowing civil unions that grant inheritance, property ownership, medical and other rights previously reserved for married couples.

The annual Vallarta Pride celebration expanded this year from a three-day weekend to five days of beach parties, a new women-only party, music festivals, fashion shows and a mass LGBT commitment ceremony.

**Riviera Nayarit:** Mexico has a habit of assigning a catchy name to a string of towns to create a "new" destination. It was just seven years ago that the 192-mile stretch of coast north of Puerto Vallarta became the Riviera Nayarit, taking in Nuevo Vallarta, Bucerias, the luxury enclave Punta Mita, Litibu (created by the folks who brought us Cancun and Los Cabos), Sayulita, and a collection of fishing villages including San Francisco (a.k.a. San Pancho), Rincon de Guayabitos and San Blas.

Except for some paved roads, rehabbed town squares, and a few new hotels and restaurants, these sleepy Old World oases didn't change all that much. But Puerto Vallarta joined the club this year, and Vallarta Nayarit was born, attended by \$10 million in government funding for the rebranding.

We're keeping an anxious eye on what we still think of as "the coastal villages north of Puerto Vallarta."

**No anxiety over this, though:** Ten of the 31 cleanest beaches in the country, as certified last month by the Mexican Institute of Standardization and Certification, are on the Nayarit coast. Punta Mita, Banderas Bay, Compostela and San Blas were recognized for the first time this year, joining Sayulita, Nuevo Vallarta (with three beaches) and Bucerias (...).

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