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People rest along the Malecon, the sea wall, on the Pacific Ocean in Mazatlan, Mexico.

Steve Haggerty / McClatchy-Tribune News Service

# In search of a safe vacation in Mexico

By Anne Z. Cooke | McClatchy-Tribune News Service  
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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 8-year-old 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 were touring 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.

Was Mexico safe? I needed to see for myself, so I booked a week in Mazatlan, in the state of Sinaloa on the Pacific Ocean's golden beaches. Though I timed my trip to coincide with the city's "Day of the Dead" revelries, the trip was less of a vacation and more of a mission. Were the headlines coming from Mexico telling the whole story? The only way to find out was to talk to people who live there.

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? Would the same rules of caution that you or I follow when we travel to cities around the world be enough to avoid trouble here?

### Feeling safe, but alert

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

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### If you go

#### Flights

Fly on Alaska Airlines through Mexico City or directly from the West Coast. Mazatlan's airport is 40 minutes from the historic beach district.

#### STAYING THERE

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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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.

I'm glad I came to see for myself. 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.

I spent a day exploring the historic downtown area, 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 peaked 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 bar, practicing their routines. As the pianist banged out a tune, the maestro herself — stern and imposing — went from one to the next, raising a leg higher there and arching an arm back here. The scene spoke of a tranquil lifestyle. But it didn't mean I had forgotten to stay alert.

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.

*A sense of outrage*

"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."

Miller, part of a large American community here, was also reassuring. But he couldn't change my sense of outrage. It's drug users in the United States who've created Mexico's crime wave. It's the drug users on our side of the border that continue to fuel the drug cartel murders.

"I don't know why people here don't get it," said Ashley, the hardworking 24-year old who cut my hair the day before I left. She smiled, remembering a long-ago vacation in Ensenada. "It's all our fault. We're just stupid," she told me, stabbing at another piece of hair.

She was right, of course. If the demand for drugs stopped tomorrow, the cartels would vanish. Not in a day, but soon. No sales, no cash, no more bodies rotting in acid-filled barrels. Market economics at work, pure and simple.

*Where to go*

If you 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 kitchen ware to vegetables, fruits, 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 and to tournaments. We don't worry."

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. "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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