

# Statement on Safety and Security of Educational Travel in Yucatán, México

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**Submitted to the Safety & Responsibility Committee  
of the Overseas Study Advisory Council**

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México is large and diverse country that has several distinctive cultural, environmental, and socioeconomic regions. Traditionally México is divided into three macro regions, the northern states which borders with the USA, the central region which includes México City and other major urban zones, and the southern area which is often associated with Indigenous cultures. This last region includes the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Tabasco, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo. The states in the southern region have no travel advisory.

See this visualization of US State Department Travel Advisory here:

[http://howsafeismexico.com/mexico\\_states\\_safety.html](http://howsafeismexico.com/mexico_states_safety.html)

<http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings/mexico-travel-warning.html>

1. There is no national security threat to the USA or threat to international tourism visitors in the Yucatán peninsula.

2. There is no internal civil unrest or sociopolitical nor economic instability in this region. Relevant highlights from the **“Mexico 2013 Crime and Safety Report: Mérida”** published by the US Department of State Bureau Of Diplomatic Security (OSAC) available on the web state that:

(<https://www.osac.gov/pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=14351> )

- The Yucatan Peninsula – Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Yucatan states – has not suffered the same level of escalating violence seen in other parts of Mexico; however, there is some narco-related violence that affects Cancun (usually not in the Hotel Zone/tourist area).
- There is no evidence that indicates that criminals specifically target American citizens
- There are no known indigenous terrorist groups in the Yucatan.
- There is no evidence to suggest that international terrorist groups are operating in the Yucatán
- The U.S. Consulate has not received any reports of Americans being victims of actual kidnappings in 2012.
- There are no travel restrictions or warnings imposed by the Department of State in the three states of Yucatan, Campeche, and Quintana Roo. The latest country specific information and travel alerts for Mexico can be found at [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_970.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_970.html)

## Crime and Safety in the Yucatan

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Given this fact that the US State Department does not have a travel advisory for the locations in which the proposed course, and the fact that the State Department acknowledges that “There is no evidence that indicates that criminals specifically target American citizens”, I now turn to issues of regular or routine crime that can occur anywhere in the world as a function of urban modernity. The following information has been collected to gain a comparative understanding of the risks of being a victim of crime in Yucatán and the state of Indiana where I live, specifically in Bloomington, Indiana, and Indianapolis.

- Yucatán has a violent death (murder) rate of 2.2 per 100,000 which is the same level of danger that is present in Wyoming and Idaho according to 2010 figures; in 2014 Hawaii has the lowest murder rate at 2.8, which is even higher than that of Yucatán ([http://www.statemaster.com/graph/crime\\_mur\\_wit\\_fir-death-rate-per-100-000](http://www.statemaster.com/graph/crime_mur_wit_fir-death-rate-per-100-000)).
- Indiana by comparison has an average murder rate that of between 4.5 and 5.8 for the period 2006-2012 (<http://www.usa.com/indiana-state-crime-and-crime-rate.htm>).
- This rate, which consistently parallels the national rates, is nonetheless more than double that of the state of Yucatán, México.
- The murder rate for Bloomington Indiana (<http://www.city-data.com/crime/crime-Bloomington-Indiana.html>) is in excess of this violence: as reported by city-data.com the rates have been between 3.7 and 4.9 for the years 2006 to 2012.
- The murder rate for Indianapolis is roughly three times Bloomington and five to six times that of Yucatán; ranging from 11.5 to 17.5 for same period (<http://www.city-data.com/crime/crime-Indianapolis-balance-Indiana.html>).

In short, there is significantly more violent death and risk of personal danger due to crime and violence in Bloomington, Indianapolis and the state of Indiana generally than there is in the location of the proposed IU course, i.e., Yucatán. Online sources confirm this fact, see: [http://howsafeismexico.com/international\\_murder\\_rates.html](http://howsafeismexico.com/international_murder_rates.html)

These figures compare violent death as reported for México with murder rates as reported in the USA. Total violent crime are not included. The USA however consistently generates a rate in range of 420 for the nation and for metropolitan area for the years from 2006 to 2012. The data collected through a variety of national and international sources compares the USA to México points to the fact that in statistical terms the USA is in fact much more dangerous place than México in terms of international rankings: the USA is Ranked 22<sup>nd</sup> or 3 times more than México in terms of total crimes per 1000; Ranked 1<sup>st</sup> or 6 times more than México in terms of gun based violent crime; Ranked 9<sup>th</sup> or 2 times more than México in terms of rape; Ranked 1<sup>st</sup> or 6 times more than México in terms of violent rape; ranked 4<sup>th</sup> or 4 times more than México in terms of murders with firearms. ( see source <http://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/compare/Mexico/United-States/Crime> ). See also <http://blog.diegovalle.net/2010/06/statistical-analysis-and-visualization.html> . See <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2012/11/comparing-mexican-states-equivalent-countries>

The conclusion to be drawn from this information is clear: Yucatán is not only a safe destination for an Indiana University study abroad program, it is in fact safer to be in Yucatán, México, than in Bloomington, Indiana.

## Why is Yucatán Safe? Understanding Culture, History and Tourism

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The states of Yucatán and Quintana Roo form a tourism network region consisting of several interconnected destinations that receive a total estimate of between 3-4 million tourists a year. Of this figure there is an average of 58-62% foreign or international visitors a year. The USA is the primary source for this international tourism although data is not available on the exact percentage, but 70 to 80% is a reasonable guess based on my analysis of tourism statistics for the region between 1960 and the present (see Castañeda 1996, 2009, n.d.). The major destinations include the colonial cities of Mérida and Valladolid, the beach resort cities from Cancun, Puerto Morelos, Playa del Carmen, the Maya Riviera, and two of the three most visited archaeological sites of México, i.e., Chichén Itzá and Tulum.

Historically the last period of violence in this region was the 19<sup>th</sup> century Caste War (a type of civil war) that ended in 1902 (Reed 1964). Further although the Mexican Revolution was an extremely long lasting and violent period in México's history (1910-1917), this violence primarily effected northern and central México. The Mexican revolution in the peninsula consisted entirely of the arrival the Constitutionalist Army in 1917 to occupy the capital city of Mérida: There were no battles or armed conflicts. This fact stimulated one renown historian to write a dissertation and then a book about how and why there was a virtual absence of any violence associated with the Mexican Revolution in Yucatán (Joseph 1982). This analysis has been further extended by scholars such as Fallaw (2001). There has not been any subsequent episodes in the history of the Yucatán Peninsula of sustained and focused violence associated with politics, social unrest, drug wars beyond the normal criminal activity of a contemporary society.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Yucatán peninsula has been an especially prized target of Christian evangelical proselytization. In the community of Xocempich only 17 kilometers from Pisté and Chichén, a Presbyterian missionary bible school was established in 1926. This was a primary home base for proselytization throughout the rural areas of Yucatán by generations of US protestants. This fact is hugely significant as it points to a nearly 100 year history of local communities having sustained personal interactions and long-standing positive relationships with American citizens. Visitors to the Yucatán and especially to these nearby communities are singularly impressed with the warmth, openness, hospitality and friendliness with which Maya communities receive foreigners in their communities.

Since the 1960s evangelical churches from throughout the USA, but especially Indiana and Illinois, have maintained annual summer communitarian trips with groups of 15 to 30 high school kids to the communities of Pisté and Xocempich. The Presbyterian Church of Muncie Indiana alone has been a major visitor and contributor with an annual summer presence of twenty some Americans for a 1-2 week period since the 1970s. (<http://www.firstpresmuncie.org/mission-programs/international-missions.html>) Other missions include: Lebanon Presbyterian Church (Lebanon Ohio) <http://lebanonpresbyterian.org/~lebanonp/cms-assets/documents/142858-520108.eymt2014-info-page.pdf>; New Creation Presbyterian Church (Greensboro, NC)

[http://www.oocities.org/dulcebelen\\_69/Xocenpich.html](http://www.oocities.org/dulcebelen_69/Xocenpich.html) ; Sunshine Community Church (Grand Rapids, MI) <http://www.crcna.org/news-and-views/crc-congregation-reaches-out-mayans-mexico>

The significance of this point in terms of this request is that there absolutely no hostility or possibility of violence directed at US citizens. Even the level of normal or petty crime against foreigners is non-existent. In addition, to the strong morality typical of rural traditional communities, there is an entrenched cultural ethos that foreigners are to be treated with respect, helped, and protected.

During the height of the drug wars in México between 2008 and 2011 Yucatán Peninsula, which includes the states of Campeche, Quintana Roo and Yucatán, the region endured an unsurprising period of safety, security, peace and tranquility. Common rumor in many sectors of Yucatec society is that the Mexican drug lords have called Yucatán a no-war zone for several reasons; not only do many reportedly own summer homes in places such as Mérida, Cancun, Playa del Carmen and the Maya Riviera, but the recognition that violence will interfere with tourism. The understanding is that this tourism sector of the economy is of such vital national importance that to disrupt the Mexican tourism economy would provoke an extremely harsh and thorough military reprisal from the Mexican government.

As long ago as 1968, the UN World Tourism Organization sponsored conferences to investigate the relationship between tourism development and social peace and stability within nations. For over forty years the nations of the world have recognized and created national policy and planning based on the accepted strategy of tourism development as the means and method for modernization, economic development, creation of middle class, and the fomentation of sociopolitical security of nations (de Kadt 1974; Pattullo 2009; Pattullo and Minelli 2009; Castañeda and Burtner 2010; WTO 2007; Castañeda 2012). D'Amore (1988) has explicitly argued that "tourism is a force for world peace." Castañeda and Burtner (2010) have shown how the embargo of US and international tourism to Guatemala was a strong factor in effecting a shift in the form and use of violence by the Guatemalan military dictatorship in 1982-84. The significance is that there is a strong correlation, regardless of casual direction, between tourism and sociopolitical stability, safety, and security.

México, since the creation in early 1970s of a strategic plan and policy of tourism as a means of modernization, national security, and sociopolitical stability (Collins 1979, Torres 2002; Clancy 2001), has been a pioneer of creating tourism development in a manner that effectively addresses needs defined by long term national agenda. México, neither the government nor the drug lords, is not going to dismantle the Yucatán tourism region to violence.

According to the US Embassy in México, the last Security Update post was February 18 2013 <http://mexico.usembassy.gov/embassy-messages.html> . In this post all information concerned activities, risks, incidents, and security issues in northern not southern México. There have been no warnings for the southern region of Yucatán peninsula on the Mexican Embassy website at all since the website was created as a form of communication.

# Selection from Request for Exemption to Allow IU Study Abroad Program in Yucatán, México

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**Describe the academic relevance of the program to the students' degree programs and/or the importance of the presence of the students to the program itself (e.g. the impact of their contributions locally).**

Students with any IU major and minor are accepted into the program. In general students benefit from international study abroad experience which can aid them in the completion of their degree programs. Students achieve international and intercultural learning that contributes significantly to careers in all fields of specialization. Students with majors in fields of anthropology, Latin America and Caribbean studies, Spanish, international studies, global affairs, international business, SPEA, tourism studies, or other fields of social science benefit from hands-on experiential learning in overseas context that is of high significance for future career choices or entering graduate programs.

Student participation in a service learning program overseas deepens and further valorizes these benefits. Specifically service-learning provides students with a broader and deeper understanding of the course content, fosters their sense of civic engagement, and sharpens their insights into themselves and their place in the community.

The service learning component of the course contributes greatly to the improvement of the well-being and livelihood of the communities that host IU service learning students. The course is designed as a community action research project in which students learn directly through investigation the needs of a community in relation to international tourism development and then develop and conduct a concrete plan of action with community partners that can achieve these collective goals and objectives. In this way the community directly benefits from student participation and the students directly gain crucial experiences in working in groups with civic engagement objectives.

## **The detailed preparation the students receive during orientation to prepare them for security-related issues (with detailed examples).**

1. There are three Orientation Sessions, pre departure and on arrival in Playa del Carmen and on arrival in Pisté to discuss the specific safety issues of each on site location.
2. Students are informed of the buddy system that is used. In Playa del Carmen students must walk in pairs or groups of three at night when not in a group together. In Pisté students are required to identify two persons with whom they maintain informed of their whereabouts and activities. At all times a log is maintained by the grad assistant as to the locations of every student and their activities.
3. A strict curfew is enforced that is appropriate to each location.
4. Security in Playa del Carmen. Regular and tourist police are on watch 24 hours a day in Playa in all the major tourism sections of town.
5. Security in Pisté. This is a town of 5000 persons in which residents know all other residents at least by family name and residence. Students are easily identified by residents as forming a student group associated with the director and thus participate in keeping alert of the student safety. There is high level of safety in this town due to family and kinship relationships, the director's personal social network, and the fact that locals have a cultural ethos of protecting and assisting foreigners in their town.
6. One of the most significant dangers in Pisté is the amount of tourist traffic during the day and night which creates excessive congestion on the main commercial artery. Sidewalks must be used to prevent accidents from the tourist charter buses, taxis, small three wheel motorcycle taxis, mopeds, and other transportation vehicles that clog the streets. This presents a danger when walking during the day and early evening. The presence of traffic police at all major intersections throughout the day alleviate this problem. Police patrol Pisté on a periodic basis during the night.
7. Students are warned about dogs and cats that may wander in the streets. these should not be touched, petted or engaged as they are homeless and may carry bacteria that could cause illness. Rabid dogs are killed by city authorities as soon as identified.
8. In twenty years of taking students to Pisté on field study abroad programs no student has been robbed, assaulted, or violently harassed. Nonetheless students are advised on: how to identify and avoid drunks who may engage students with unwanted conversation; how to put their valuables including money in safe locations in their luggage; and how to interact with persons in a positive manner that facilitates their safety.
9. Students must carry a Mexican cell phone with them at all times or use a US cell that allows them to receive and make local phone calls.
10. Strict prohibition of alcoholic intoxication as well as consumption of other legal and illegal drugs is enforced. Those who are under age according to Indiana law are not allowed to drink alcohol.
11. The use of sunglasses are strictly prohibited in Pisté and Playa, and other field trip destinations with the exception of the beach.
12. Students are required to wear appropriate clothing that does not call attention to their physical body or their wealth.
13. Students are provided strict rules foods and climate and given protocols for recognizing oncoming illness and going to clinics for treatment.



## **Describe the local support structure on site**

### Safety And Security

The community of Pisté has a fully employed police department that patrols on a frequent basis during the nights and that maintains traffic control of the principal arteries.

### Medical Services

The community of Pisté is home to four private and one government medical clinics to which students have access to all services. Typically students may have need for a doctor at one of these clinics for stomach issues, son intoxication, allergies, or other infection. Costs for treatment on average are approximately between \$25 and \$40 including consult and medications. In addition, the greater Pisté region is the home of many traditional Maya health specialists or health service providers of massage, midwifery, herbal and plant healing. Students have access, if needed, to the tourist ambulance service stationed at 3 kilometers away at Chichén Itzá. Major hospitals are located 40 minutes away in the city of Valladolid or 2 hours away in the capital city of Mérida, Yucatán. Medical emergencies require transportation to a hospital in Mérida and possible evacuation from the Mérida MID airport. Minimum student insurance is set to cover these costs.

### Transportation

Local transportation includes hourly bus to Mérida and hourly service to Valladolid. There is a fleet of some 30 taxis that serve Pisté and can provide transportation immediately to any hospital or airport. There is also a tourist ambulance service at Chichén.

### Social Network

The students are connected to the social network of the course instructor, who has 30 years of experience living in and conducting research in the community. He has developed a strong social network on which students and the course can rely in terms of safety, transportation, assistance, and emergency situations. Specifically, a half dozen taxi drivers form a type of informal supervision and liaison with students; they are available to provide assistance to students when in need. As well the posada owners where students take lodging have previously worked as liaison for educational groups led by Dr. Castañeda.

### Supplies

There are five pharmacies in town for most every need. Advanced health care can be provided in a hospital 40 minutes away in Valladolid. Local stores provide students the ability to buy any kind of personal product that they are in need using.

### Facility

The building complex is a privately owned property is an enclosed compound and consists of three story building on a 1000 square meter lot. The facility includes lodging for three staff, three classrooms, high speed internet, indoor and outdoor space for social gatherings or large group meetings. The facility provides safety against hurricanes and has a landline with unlimited free calling to the USA in case of any emergency.

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