

OSEA Statement On the Question of Safety in Yucatán & México

Recently, the US news (Feb. 2009) has reported a high level of drug related violence and the US State Department has issued a warning for travelers to Mexico. This reporting has been spurred primarily by the release of a documentary by a filmmaker who worked in the border towns and areas of the US and Mexico. I saw some of the footage on CNN and indeed some scenes are a bit scary; all of these scenes are from border zone towns—not Yucatán. He conducted dangerous clandestine interviews with drug lords in border zones. Further, the filmmaker, in his televised comments, communicated alarmist messages about the level of danger: He wanted to get the message out not only about his film, but also that there is a drug war going on in the border areas and that this war is going under the radar of the news.

You might take as proof of his thesis that once the news of his documentary was over, there has not been any further news this week about drug violence and wars in Mexico. The cover up continues! Or, on the contrary, the absence of follow up news events seems to me to be evidence that the situation is not worth over reacting and not as the alarmist filmmaker portrays it.

The Mexican drug cartels primarily operate out of the northern states that share borders with the USA-- cities such as Monterrey and Tijuana. This area has been a war zone for many years and indeed there are places where you should certainly be careful about what you do. In contrast, Yucatan Peninsula is recognized throughout México – by Mexicans -- as being "safe" tranquilo, calm, non-violent. There is not nearly the level of crime and violence of the urban areas of north and central México. It is a provincial state, with much lower population, lower density of urbanism and much more peaceful. Just as we think of the US “South” as less dangerous because the people are friendlier, the pace of life slower, and so on, the Yucatan is calmer, safer, slower paced, less crime, less violence, less aggression. There are two reasons.

First the Yucatecos are not prone to violence, aggression, and that stereotypical machismo of northern México. The stereotype of Yucatecos is that they are chivalrous, to put it positively, or even effeminate, to put it negatively! They do not have the bolster, bravado, and domineering presence that stereotypically characterize the “Mexican” especially as drawn on the Charo/Cowboy, Pancho Villa, the Mariachi, and Hollywood portrayals of the Mexican as (always) the Bad Guy. They, the Yucatecos, themselves complain about how dangerous it is to go to México City or other parts of México where there are (goodness)... Mexicans! this would be equivalent to say, someone from Indiana or from the South being afraid of going to New York City or being afraid of New Yorkers. Indeed, NYC and Mexico City are dangerous if you don't know how to handle yourself. If you don't know not to wander aimlessly in ghetto neighborhoods, not to look at strangers in the eye, etc. etc. However, for the millions of visitors to NY and to Mexico City there is not much danger at all. My point is simple: The Yucateco appreciates a social and public life that is safe and carefree from the thought of violence and crime. Women are completely safe walking around downtown Merida alone after hours.

Second, tourism is the main industry of the region. Tourism depends on everyone being happy, the tourists not being afraid, and their safety guaranteed. This is the situation from Merida to Cancun to Playa del Carmen to Tulum and beyond. There are plenty of police patrolling the streets of all these cities to ensure the safety of the main source of income of the region. In Merida, the

police begin patrolling by midnight and just go up and down the streets at 10 miles an hour all night in the tourist zones. In Playa, there are police every few blocks on the main strip that are there to ensure the safety of everyone and to eliminate crime against tourists. Cancun also has this system. What this means is that Cancun, Playa, Tulum, Merida are just as safe as NY, Boston, Vegas, Orlando, Miami, Hollywood, San Francisco, Indianapolis, DC, if not safer. There are no random acts of drug war violence against tourists, especially not on the beach, at archaeological sites, on the streets of these cities, or even at the clubs in Playa and Cancun. The police are constantly patrolling tourist zones to stop petty crime. The violent aggressive crime of killing people simply does not happen in tourist zones as a rule. It does not happen in public spaces of tourism.

Furthermore, we are staying in Pisté, which is even safer than those other places. It is a town of 5,000 people, where everyone knows everyone else. In over 20 years of research in Yucatan, there has never been any violent crime against tourists or any of the students participating in OSEA field schools at Chichén and never in Pisté. The petty crime is virtually non-existent. Two weeks ago there was a newspaper article about a wallet which was claimed stolen by a tour guide. However, it was found by a different guide who said he picked it up to give it back to the person, whom he knew. The vast majority of Maya at Chichén and Pisté are honest and much prefer to give a lost wallet back out of moral obligation than steal money. In Pisté male or female you could walk around at 3am without any problems -- except from me! Once in Pisté, everyone will know who you are and why you are there and that you are "with me". This is a guarantee of your safety and of your possessions, as if you were not already very safe. The Maya and the Yucateco are proud of being honest. They want to further their reputation of being friendly, honest, and safe.

The Positive side of the Negative side:

The drug lords are fighting each other and thus they target specific persons with whom they are fighting. They are not interested in evoking a war with society, which would disrupt their own drug trafficking and marketing. They want to control the market not tear it down. To enact violence against random citizens not involved in the traffic would be to create a situation that would turn against them. Thus, further, the problem is really one of a turf war between a Yucatecos based mafia that has controlled peninsula for decades and a new northern México intruder. There is no interest in getting anyone else involved. Thus, also you as a participant in the program do not want to associate at all with anyone doing or dealing drugs. It has always been OSEA policy that consuming drugs while on the program is grounds for immediate dismissal. Now to take drugs means that you get involved with the drug traffickers, which means then that you are putting yourself at a different kind of risk. This should therefore be a compelling incentive to not get involved with drugs at all while in México, just in case the idea ever crossed your mind. In fact so long as you stay away from drugs, in Merida, Cancun, Playa, Tulum, anywhere in México, you are ensuring your own safety.

Along the same lines, when you travel on your break, you will need to behave in a manner that is safe and not risky. Travel with a partner from the program or a friend from home and don't invite being taken advantage of; avoid risky behaviors and decisions. In Pisté you are exceptionally safe.

I hope that this helps assuage your worries and concerns. Please feel free to contact me with any questions. As well, Sarah Taylor can provide information about the safety and risks of traveling alone as a white woman in Yucatan.