

Mexico Tourism Bounces Back

Mexico has taken a beating over the past several years, ever since the triple whammy of drug violence, the H1N1 flu scare and a prolonged recession that curtailed travel in the countries that supply the bulk of its tourism. But if the Tianguis Turistico at the end of March is any indication, the country's tourism industry has bounced back in a big way. The annual gathering of travel industry representatives and journalists from all over Mexico and around the world is Latin America's biggest trade show, important enough that President Felipe Calderon flew directly from meeting with the pope in Guanajuato to open this year's convocation in Puerto Vallarta. Tianguis typically is Mexico's platform for announcing major tourism developments.

Calderon and his Secretary of Tourism, Gloria Guevara, focused on the surprisingly robust health of the Mexico's tourism industry. "Today, we have a 98 percent repeat visitor rate and 99 out of every 100 visitors recommends our destinations," Guevara said in her address.

Mexico's Ministry of Tourism (SECTUR) announced in February that 2011 was a record-breaking year that saw 22.67 million international travelers. That's 2 percent higher than in 2010, which in turn was 5.7 percent higher than 2009. More important, 2011's international arrivals were 0.2 percent higher than 2008, Mexico's best year in history to that point.

Although international travel by U.S. travelers dropped by 4.1 percent in 2011, the percentage going to Mexico increased by .9 percent, despite a drop-off in the second half of the year. One-third of those travelers visited Mexico — still the most popular destination for U.S. travelers. But the bulk of Mexico's growth came from tourists from other countries, with major increases in visitors from Brazil (66 percent), Russia (55 percent), China (30 percent) and Colombia (23.2 percent). Italy, Australia, the United Kingdom and France also posted double-digit increases; Japan and Canada also sent more visitors to Mexico in 2011 than in 2010.

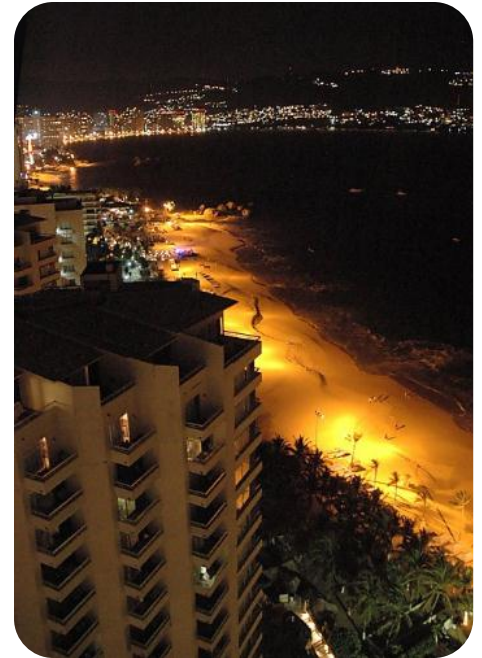
Tourism spurred by the so-called 2012 prophecy attributed to the ancient Maya calendar is expected to make 2012 another banner year. The country's goal of soon becoming one of the world's top five tourist destinations, which seemed a stretch when it was announced a couple of years ago, now looks within reach.

Puerto Vallarta shines

Tianguis' numbers this year reflects the tourism recovery. This year's 22,000 business appointments beat last year's Tianguis by nearly 40 percent and involved more than 50 percent of domestic and foreign buyers in the trade. Even more impressive, this year's attendance of 7,000 beat last year's event by 75 percent.

As the first destination to host Tianguis under the new scheme of rotating destinations annually after being hosted by Acapulco for 3 years, Puerto Vallarta took the spotlight. The city finished the overhaul of its *malecón* for the event, unveiling a spanking new pedestrian promenade studded by sculptures, benches, and 22 *pangas* (fishing boats) that local artists have adorned with murals, religious themes, city attractions and abstract designs.

The malecón overhaul is part of an image overhaul to differentiate Puerto Vallarta's attractions from that of Mexico's other beach destinations. Sayulita, on the adjacent Riviera Nayarit (Puerto Vallarta's Tianguis co-host), is in the midst of turning the streets around its central plaza into a pedestrian-only zone, which should help to alleviate the noise and congestion that have increased along with the town's popularity.



Other Tianguis news highlights:

Mazatlan's efforts to combat the negative publicity following several cruise lines' dropping their port calls there in the wake of a shooting early last year include a tourism police force at the pier, in the port and tourist areas. The officers will not only protect tourists but give them advice and answer travel-related questions. Mazatlan tourist officials are continuing to meet with cruise line representatives and have begun TV ads and online ads featuring testimonials from U.S. and Canadian citizens who live in the city. Continental, US Airways and United are increasing their capacity to Mazatlan, and the city is forecasting an 8 percent increase in visitor numbers this year.

In **Acapulco**, hit last year by incidents of drug violence uncharacteristic of Mexico's resort cities, a "[Remember Acapulco](#)" campaign and website aims to reassure visitors that they will be safe in the country's first resort city, and to revive that old glamour in the process. Officials say their "Safe Guerrero" campaign that boosted lighting along Costera Miguel Aleman, installed hundreds of surveillance cameras and placed federal security forces in charge of nighttime law enforcement has cut homicide by 40 percent since last October. Acapulco fan and Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim is heading a project to build a marine museum, improve transportation and develop new hotels in the historic district.

The addition of Mineral de Pozos (Guanajuato), Sombrerete (Zacatecas), Angangueo (Michoacán), Cuatrociénegas (Coahuila), Magdalena de Kino (Sonora) and Pahuatlán (Puebla) to Mexico's list of [Magic Pueblos](#) this year brings the total to 54

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