



## The Future of Mexico's Pacific Coast is as Bright as its Glittering Blue Ocean An Excerpt of Smart Meetings, by Talia Salem



Anyone who listens to the news knows that last year was a rough one for Mexico.

Headlines were flooded with reports of the swine flu, drug violence and the recession severely impacting their important tourism industry. Planners in the U.S. hesitated to travel to Mexico, and meetings and incentives were cancelled due to health and security concerns.

Today, the swine flu pandemic seems as last year as the iPhone 3G, and concerns over catching the sickness have decreased. And while violence remains a problem in some areas (particularly around the U.S.-Mexican border), the popular destinations for meetings and incentives along the Mexico Pacific Coast are far from the reaches of the unrest. "In a way, it's a constant mission to inform people of the situation we have in Los Cabos — we are 1,000 miles away from the border," says Renato Mendonca, vice president of marketing, Los Cabos Convention & Visitors Bureau. Destinations like Los Cabos have been working hard and traveling the U.S. to get the word out about the safety of their destinations. Niambi Ivery, conventions and meetings planner for American Express Business Travel, says that security concerns were not an issue when she planned a 150-person incentive trip for client Subaru of America in Los Cabos.

Prior to this rough patch, simply saying the word "Mexico" would bring to mind images of glittering shorelines, exotic scenery, lush wildlife and adrenaline-pumping adventures—all of which have put Mexico on the meetings, as well as leisure, destination map. And while in close proximity to the U.S., Mexico has a wonderfully rich culture of its own, shaped with its unique history and geography. Enhancing the visitor experience, it's complemented with diverse architecture, colorful local traditions and mouth-watering cuisine. Then there's Mexico's famous sunny skies and warm weather year-round, which have made it a popular refuge in the winter.

Well—news flash—none of that has changed. Mexico is as attractive a destination as ever, with all of its allure still intact. And people are catching on. According to the Mexico Tourism Board, 21.5 million people visited Mexico in 2009, and during the first four months of 2010, visitation to Mexico from the United States was up 5.9%.

Mexico also continues to be a great destination for meetings and incentives, offering a variety of benefits for planners. "We have strategic partnerships with the main industry organizations, such as PCMA, ASAE, MPI and SITE, and we have an online lead-generator platform," says Rodolfo Lopez Negrete, COO of the Mexico Tourism Board. Plus, he says, each area's CVB also works with planners to find attractive room rates, unique venues and activities. This past year, in fact, Mexico hosted many high-profile meetings...

“For 2011, corporate meetings and incentive travel look to be on a very stable recovery path,” Negrete says. “We are conscious that the booking window for the decision-making process in corporate meetings is getting shorter, and in that fast response strategy, Mexico plays a very important role, due to its proximity, connectivity and cultural added values.”

### **Why Mexico? Why Now?**

Anyone who has traveled to Mexico can tell you that Mexican hospitality is reason enough to meet here. Beyond the genuine service and a bona fide effort to make visitors feel welcome, however, Mexico also gives planners other reasons to take their meetings south. Ivery says “the authentic Mexican flavor coupled with great American options” is one big plus of meeting in Mexico rather than domestically.

“Something a bit more tangible is the zero-tax law that has made Mexico even more competitive as a business travel destination. The law suspends the 16% sales tax on international meetings and conventions held in Mexico,” Negrete says. “The tax-free initiative covers venue rental, lodging, food and drinks inside the venues, airport/seaport/border transfers and trips between hotels and meeting places. Also covered are related event services, such as set-up, registration, masters of ceremonies, translators, hosts, audiovisual equipment, decoration, security and cleaning.”

In addition to the tax incentives, the peso-to-dollar exchange rate gives planners more bang for their buck, he points out. “Most of the hotels are adding value to their services, and there are a lot of promotions out there,” says Los Cabos CVB’s Mendonca.

Plus, Mexico has invested, and is investing, in its meetings and tourism infrastructure, with new hotels and convention centers opening all over the Pacific Coast, giving planners much more options when it comes to their events. “This is actually a very exciting time in Mexico for adding meeting space. The cities of Mazatlan, Cancun, Puerto Vallarta, Tampico and



Zacatecas all recently completed construction of new meeting facilities. And, in November, Queretaro will finish building a new convention center as well,” Negrete says. “Besides the convention centers, important and recognized hotel brand properties are investing in our country, including great state-of-the-art facilities for meeting attendees.”

As we emerge from the recession, Mexico is a perfect locale to mix business with pleasure pre- and post-meeting, he adds. And the country makes it even easier to discover its diverse culture with the recently launched 10 Routes of Mexico. Announced at Tianguis Turistico in April, these travel circuits weave a common theme through various Mexican regions such as The Mystery and Origin of the Maya Culture or the Thousand Flavors of Mole. “[The routes] are designed to combine some of our more well-known travel experiences, like Mexico’s famous beach and sun destinations, with our less well-known, but no less legendary cultural, archeological or luxury experiences,” Negrete says. “ The meetings compass tells us that south is finally going north.

## Mazatlan



The “Pearl of the Pacific”, the coast’s second-largest city. The area is split into two major sectors: Old Mazatlan and the Zona Dorada or Golden Zone, home to the majority of the area’s resorts. Mazatlan is also known for its recreation, due to its coastal locale and its proximity to the Sierra Madre Mountains; it is particularly renowned for fly-fishing. “Some of our surrounding areas are also beneficial to delegates,” says Carlos Berdegue, vice president of the Mazatlan Hotel Association. “There are

half-day and full-day group excursions to wonderful historic sites, including El Quelite, Copala and Cosala, a remarkable, 16th-century town filled with history, culture and ecological wonders.”

Open since late 2009, the \$61-million, 25-acre Mazatlan International Center complex borders a new marina and a championship golf course, and is close to the beachfront resorts and hotels of the city’s Zona Dorada. The SMG-managed center has nearly 154,000 sq. ft. of indoor/outdoor meeting and exhibition space and 17 meeting rooms. It can accommodate groups of up to 5,000 attendees and incorporates sustainable practices such as recycled water and a double-glazed glass façade. The facility features the 17,222-square-foot, Sea of Cortes ceramic-tile mural—the largest work of its kind (it’s even in the *Guinness Book of World Records!*). “During the past decade, Mazatlan has emerged as a top Mexico destination with world-class accommodations and a dynamic business sector,” Berdegue says. “This beautiful, state-of-the-art facility further expands our offerings, enabling us to host citywide conventions.” The center was built on the burgeoning Marina Mazatlan, a 15-square-mile development with plans for new luxury hotels, residences, restaurants, shops and more.



To accompany the new convention center, the city has many meeting hotels. El Cid Resorts encompasses four area properties with a total of 1,000 guest rooms in a variety of locations.

A Mazatlan must-see and the city’s cultural epicenter, Old Mazatlan is made up of 180 blocks teeming with historic buildings, landmarks, restaurants, cafes, entertainment venues, art galleries, museums and shops. “[Old Mazatlan] has

many wonderful features that are ideal for off-site events, including historical settings, cultural venues and gardens for cocktail receptions, formal dinners and parties,” Berdegue says.