

CURRENT SAFETY UPDATE FOR TRAVEL TO ENSENADA , BAJA MEXICO (March '09)



Since numerous media outlets across the country have been reporting recently about the violence taking place in Mexico, we want to relay to you our assessment of the situation. We want to help alleviate concerns about you and/or your student's participation in an upcoming mission trip to the City of Children.

We have been following and tracking all the media and information on the violence in Mexico for several months now. We have consistently been combing through the U.S. Sites – Department of Justice, FBI, Department of Homeland Security, ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) as well as corresponding with numerous ministries and mission effort that also send teams to this part of Mexico. Natasha and I also travel back and forth between Ensenada and San Diego (through the Rosarito Beach and Tijuana areas) each week. I am including in this update some helpful information, especially about the Dept. of State travel alert that was issued on February 27 (which is nothing new – almost the same thing as what they had posted last October and April). I have also included several links from newspapers in both Mexico and the United States and ministries that describe the situation in even greater detail. Please read these as I feel they will address your concerns. Having a complete and clear knowledge of what is happening versus reacting to one or two reports or opinions is central to our analysis.

As the media continues to report on the violence caused by the drug wars between the drug cartels and local law enforcement, we believe the media is painting a picture with a broad brush, instead of centralizing the facts as they should. Yes, the violence in parts of Mexico is terrible and each day lives are being lost due to these unfortunate circumstances. We do not want to minimize the facts or the numbers that you hear and see in the media. Yet we do want to give you what we feel is a more accurate portrayal of how this either does or does not affect our spring break and summer teams that will be traveling into Mexico this year.

Most of what you hear in the media is strictly between the drug cartels and the local law enforcement and is happening along the Texas and Arizona borders – hundreds of miles from where your mission teams will be located in Ensenada and it's surrounding communities. The 2 instances that we are aware of where Americans have been involved with kidnappings and/or assaults have been when Americans have been tied up with drug trafficking. They were either involved with dealers or the transportation of goods. The biggest thing to realize is that the things being reported are happening in centralized areas, not all across Mexico or Baja. Ensenada has not had this increase in violence and has not been mentioned in the U.S. State Department reports or any of the news articles. Most of the recent civilian warnings are going out to college students who are going to Mexico during their spring break to “enjoy themselves” in ways that certainly would not be in keeping with a mission trip.

Many specific details of the situation in Mexico are not always clarified in news reports:

The incidents happening in Mexico are incidents centralized within narcotics-related areas. A recent CNN news article quotes Monte Alejandro Rubido Garcia, executive secretary for the National System for Public Safety, saying: "most of the deaths involve just drug traffickers, not ordinary citizens. Ninety percent of the people who died last year in organized crime were involved in crime," Rubido said. "The problem is among criminal gangs." CNN <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/02/19/mexico.drug.war/index.html>

Officials on both sides of the border say the American victims are rarely unlucky tourists. Some lived in Mexico and may have known their attackers. Others were businesspeople who crossed the border regularly and were seen as an easy source of cash. Still others were involved in drugs. <http://www.latimes.com/la-me-bones27-2008sep27,0,7787996.story?page=1>

A San Diego article from the beginning of this year likewise highlights this reality:

Is it safe to visit the Tijuana region? There is no simple, single answer. Much like travel anywhere in the world, it depends on who you are, where you're going, and what you're doing. U.S. visitors have been staying away from Tijuana and other border areas, fearful they could get caught up in the rise in violence and kidnappings. Yet tourists are not being targeted, and major incidents in recent months have largely bypassed tourist areas. Some U.S. citizens and permanent residents have been targeted by kidnapping groups in Tijuana and Rosarito Beach, but they are not U.S. tourists or members of the large U.S. expatriate community. According to the FBI, these victims are kidnapped while conducting business or visiting family in the area.
<http://www3.signonsandiego.com/staff/sandra-dibble/>

2. U.S. Travel Alert – The introductory paragraph of this alert (even the most recent one in Feb.) highlights the necessary knowledge travelers should have, it does not tell them to avoid traveling to Mexico:

"It is imperative that travelers understand the risks of travel to Mexico, how best to avoid dangerous situations, and whom to contact if one becomes a crime victim. Common-sense precautions such as visiting only legitimate business and tourist areas during daylight hours, and avoiding areas where prostitution and drug dealing might occur, can help ensure that travel to Mexico is safe and enjoyable."

Many people don't realize there is a huge difference between a travel alert and travel warning. According to the FAQ section of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico website, the travel alert used to be called a public announcement and in January 2008 they adjusted the terminology to "alert". So a travel alert is simply a public announcement of information about travel in Mexico (see footnote below) [1].

In contrast, a travel warning is issued to describe long-term, protracted conditions that make a country dangerous or unstable. A Travel Warning is also issued when the U.S. Government's ability to assist American citizens is constrained due to the closure of an embassy or consulate or because of a drawdown of its staff. This is not the case in Mexico.

Additionally, most people do not realize that the recently updated February 27, 2009 travel alert is only slightly altered from the October 2008 and April 2008 Alert.

3. What our teams do in Mexico and why they do it is immensely opposite of most spring breakers visiting Mexico. Our teams spend a majority of their time at the City of Children or at ministry sites (churches, schools, community service). All of our teams are required to be back at the home before dark and are not allowed to leave until the next morning.

Many of the suggestions one find's on sites regarding safe travel in Mexico has to do with issues unapplicable to our Mexico Missions trips:

- Avoid using public transport at night – we charter commercial buses and drive in our own vehicles.
- Do not travel alone – students and groups are always in teams
- Limit your alcohol amount so as not to be a target for theft – that's not why you are here.
- Be aware and alert to your surroundings at all times – this is something we always encourage teams to do. It's something that people need to do when they enter any unfamiliar city.

-- Keep your perspective: Would you avoid a country after reading this official warning? *"Crimes of violence are common, especially in large cities. Seek advice locally on areas to be avoided. Stay in the main tourist areas and be security conscious at all times."* That's how the British government warns its citizens who are thinking of visiting . . . yep, the United States.

The U.S. Dept. of State's website notes that nearly 100,000 students travel to various parts of Mexico for Spring Break. The greater part of them travel in small groups with the goal of relaxing

on the beach, partying, excessive drinking, and clubbing. Often this will be in urban areas late at night, and they may leave intoxicated and thus unaware of their surroundings. Most precautions are for students like these. Our groups travel with responsible school and church leaders and parents. The students who go with us are doing something far more meaningful and life altering during their spring and summer break.

In terms of churches and other ministries working in this part of Mexico, it's important to highlight that TeamMania is bringing 1500 students to Tijuana/Tecate area with Baja Christian Ministries to build houses and do discipleship in those communities. The Bayside Church in Placer County, CA is taking 640 to their site in Mexicali. Azusa Pacific University expects to have nearly 2500 youth and adults joining them for their spring break and summer mission trips this year. Lipscomb University in Nashville is sending approximately 100 students to Mexico on spring break.

The reason why we add this information is that it goes to show that many churches and ministries are doing the research and seeing that this part of Mexico has not changed in it's relative safety.. There will be thousands of high school students, college students, and adults ministering this year despite some of the reports and a weak economy.

Please know that we seriously, and cautiously, consider each trip into Mexico. We are doing everything within our power to ensure the safety of your participants, and ourselves. We at the City of Children value the safety of your students far more than we do the mission efforts they are involved in. We would never allow you to visit if we felt like you would be in any type of danger that is above and beyond the inherent risks that are a part of an international mission trip. Under no circumstances would we allow a team of students and adults to come into a volatile or hostile situation if we felt the danger was imminent. At this time we feel comfortable with your mission teams pressing forward with their plans. We train our team leaders to exercise the necessary precautions when traveling and to be aware of their surroundings at all times. During your trips, your participants will be traveling in groups and will not be alone on work projects, in their housing accommodations or when carrying out the various tasks and responsibilities that come along with the mission trip.

If a situation arises in the coming days that warrant us revisiting our current stance on this assessment, we will gladly do so. For now we ask that you continue to join us in prayer. not only for our mission teams, but for the children and staff they will be visiting here in Ensenada. Thank you for your time in reading this e-mail and we encourage you to forward it along to any other interested parties. If you have questions regarding this, please don't hesitate to contact us at the phone numbers or email addresses below.

Jeff and Natasha Fincher
City of Children

www.cityofchildren.com

jeff@cityofchildren.com

natasha@cityofchildren.com

256.886.0120 – American office

011.52.646.194.3506 – Mexican cell

ADDITIONAL WEB RESOURCES/UPDATES

<http://www.apu.edu/iom/mexout/announcements/13368/> – Updated Report from Azusa Pacific University

<http://www.apu.edu/iom/mexout/announcements/13485/> – Ensenada Experience blog from resident missionaries who host hundreds of American visitors each year

<http://www.apu.edu/iom/mexout/announcements/13478/> – This is from Azusa Pacific University. They send thousands of high school and college students here and to Mexicali every year.

<http://www.bajainsider.com/baja-california-travel/mexico-travel-warning.htm> – This is from a Baja, Mexico newspaper. It gives a great perspective on the situation including lots of facts and figures.

<http://www.calgaryherald.com/news/good-news/students+find+building+house+Mexico+changed+their+lives/1319493/story.html> – This is an article from the Calgary Herald dated February 23, 2009 about a mission team that recently went to Juarez on a Casas por Cristo trip.

<http://www.amor.org/Page.aspx?pid=306> – This is the response from Amor Ministries about the recent update to the travel advisory that was updated on February 27, 2009.

[1] The level of caution for U.S. citizens traveling in Mexico in the Travel Alert has not been raised; only the name has changed. Effective January 2, 2008, the State Department changed the name of two country information sheets world-wide. Consular Information Sheets are now Country Specific Information and Public Announcements are now Travel Alerts.

http://www.usembassy-mexico.gov/eng/eacs_public_announcement_faqs.html

TRAVEL ROUTE TO ENSENADA – HIGHWAY 1 BYPASSES TIJUANA

