

# Latest travel developments and new attractions in México

Christine Delsol, Special to SFGate



After being plagued with negative press, Mexico's tourism industry is finally bouncing back as evidenced by the changes to security in places like Mazatlan

Two things were abundantly clear from the day one of Mexico's Tianguis Turístico, the largest travel trade show and conference in Latin America, held in Puebla last week. First, the shift in emphasis from the sun-and-sand destinations that have lured the bulk of visitors to the country to the often overlooked interior repositories of history and culture continues apace under the new administration of Enrique Peña Nieto and his secretary of tourism, Claudia Ruiz Massieu.

Second, Mexico isn't sitting around waiting for U.S. tourists to overcome their fears that stepping foot in Mexico means instant death. The well-publicized drug cartel violence has declined in the past year but is still very much present in areas where trafficking corridors are in contention, and the new administration has already begun reforms aimed at combating the cartel violence. But the tourism department has moved on from damage control to elevating the country's tourist industry into the ranks of the world's top destinations. As its next-door neighbor, the United States is still very important, but Mexico has worked hard (and very successfully) to entice travelers from other countries. Thailand,

Turkey, Slovenia and Lithuania were among the nations attending Tianguis for the first time this year.

Buying and selling tourism products is Tianguis' reason for existence, it's also where journalists learn of new developments throughout the country that will affect travelers' lives. News from some of the destinations most familiar to U.S. tourists follows. In coming months Mexico Mix (and Get Lost, SFGate's new travel blog) will take a look at what's going on in destinations that have been lower on the international tourist radar but are poised for a higher profile under the new administration.

**Mazatlan:** After a three-year slump following several incidents of crime in the port area that prompted several cruise lines to scratch the once-popular Pacific resort destination from their itineraries, "We can tell you that Mazatlan is back," said Sinaloa state Secretary of Tourism Frank Cordoba.

After instituting such safety measures as improved lighting and numerous cameras, Mazatlan's crime rate has plunged 85 percent in the past two years, which Cordoba said have not seen a single incident of crime against tourism. Holland America's Veendam, the Norwegian Star and the Azmara Quest are returning to Mazatlan, starting in October, for the 2013-14 cruise season, and Princess Cruises plans to resume calls in Mazatlan next year. Major airlines that already fly to Mazatlan are increasing their service.

The town of El Rosario, about 40 miles south of Mazatlan, became one of Mexico's Magic Pueblos last year. Once one of Mexico's richest mining towns, El Rosario is known for its baroque church with a magnificent gold altar. It was the home of famous ranchero singer Lola Beltran, who is buried in a tomb at the church.

Cordoba also said a new superhighway between Mazatlan and Durango that is about to open — which includes the highest bridge in the Western Hemisphere and the second-highest in the world — is "going to change the southern part of Sinaloa."

**Mexico City:** The nation's capital has reversed its fortunes in recent decades; once considered a crime-ridden, polluted and congested city that tourists loved to miss, it has become one of the country's safer and more tourist-friendly destinations. Reporting a 9 percent increase in North American tourists in 2012, Mexico City officials said increasing the number of visitors from the United States is a high priority.

Years of restoring public spaces and landmark buildings, creating pedestrianized streets, improving transportation options, and hosting public concerts and other events has paid off handsomely, both for the city and for tourists. It doesn't hurt that Mexico City has championed the environment and human rights—it was the first Latin American city to legalize gay marriage, in 2009—and boasts more than 170 museums and 100 galleries, second in the world only to Paris.

As the heart of Mexico's business and industry, the capital's hotels are nearly full Monday through Thursday, but occupation drops 50 percent on weekends. This year, the city is encouraging more weekend visits with a "Disfruta Ciudad de Mexico" (Enjoy Mexico City) promotion that offers flights, hotels and tour packages to weekend and holiday visitors. More than 60 packages take in some of the city's most popular sights. Example: a Historic Center package that includes two nights at the Holiday Inn, including airport transportation, breakfast, and guided trips to Xochimilco, Coyoacán, the Frida Kahlo House museum, the National Anthropology Museum, and the pyramids of Teotihuacan, costing \$525 for two

people. Promotion in the United States is scheduled to begin next month, but the packages are already available at the Mexico City Tourism website.

And the capital's hugely popular Ecobici bike-sharing program, launched in 2010 for commuters who paid a nominal yearly fee, is being opened to the public, so tourists can now to take advantage of free short-term bicycle use. They will need to go to one of the five customer service centers and present a passport and a credit card to get an Ecobici card.

**Baja California Wine Country:** Eight valleys, stretching from Tecate in the north to Valle Llano Colorado in the south, account for 90 percent of the wine produced in Mexico. Building on the popularity of the new, modern, Museo del Vino, which opened last August on the wine route between the Valle San Antonio and Valle de Guadalupe, the wine industry is beginning a "Sabores, Musica y Viñedos" (Flavors, Music and Vineyards) program.

The heart of "Sabores, Musica y Viñedos" is a jam-packed lineup of concerts, fiestas and other events to take place at the museum and among the more than 60 wineries along the Ruta del Vino, beginning in April. Among them are the Fiestas del Mar food festival April 20, the Festival del Caballo, Arte y Vino (Horse, Art and Wine Festival) June 9, Mariachi Vargas at L.A. Cetto June 22 and the Fiestas de la Vendimia harvest festival Aug. 2.

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