



Mazatlán seeks San Antonio flight

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This column ostensibly is about Mazatlán, Mexico, but ultimately it is about San Antonio and other cities that try to promote and expand their tourism industries.

Mazatlán, in the state of Sinaloa and a population nearing 500,000, is one of at least a dozen gorgeous beach resorts on Mexico's Pacific side. Mazatlán has a lot on the ball economically.

Mexico's government has invested billions of dollars for a new highway through the mountain range east of Mazatlán, creating better drive access from the U.S. Southwest. Hundreds of millions of dollars also are being invested to expand Mazatlán's seaport.

With this momentum, resort owners and Mexican Tourism Board leaders recently visited the United States to promote Mazatlán as a tourism brand and to recruit more airline service to the city. San Antonio is on their wish list for a direct flight.

"San Antonio makes a lot of sense. It represents the third-largest market in Texas and has responded to new airline services to Mexico City," said Carlos Berdegué, president and CEO of El Cid Resorts, which operates resorts in Mazatlán and the Cancún area. Berdegué spoke from Dallas, where he visited with American Airlines representatives, on a promotional swing that also took him to Phoenix and Chicago.

Berdegué admitted that no airlines have committed yet to a San Antonio-Mazatlán route. "They have to do their studies," he said.

Deep down, he probably knows the numbers probably are not there now. Although Mazatlán's tourism marketing budget will jump to \$7 million next year from \$4 million this year, it will take "education" and seminars in San Antonio to build awareness of Mazatlán, Berdegué said.

Marco Barros, president and CEO of the San Antonio Area Tourism Council, said Mazatlán is probably No. 8 or 9 on the list of Mexico destinations San Antonio travelers would name. Cancún is the strong No. 1, he said.

"What is happening is Mazatlán sees the success of AirTran's service to Cancún (from San Antonio). They want a piece of that pie," Barros said. AirTran Airways started nonstop service between San Antonio and Cancún in May.

Barbara Prossen, marketing and community relations director for the San Antonio Airport Department, said the top four Mexican leisure market destinations are, in order, Cancún, Cabo San Lucas, Cozumel and Puerto Vallarta. "Mazatlán barely shows up," Prossen said.

Most San Antonians who visit Mazatlán do so by connecting through Dallas on American Airlines and through Houston on United Airlines, Prossen said. She suggested that instead of courting U.S. airlines to provide direct service to Mazatlán, a more likely possibility would be a Mexico-based airline, such as Aeromexico, Interjet or VivaAerobus. All have flights to San Antonio International Airport.

But if only, say, 20 people a day in San Antonio want to travel to Mazatlán, it makes better sense for them to go first to Dallas or Houston where they can join other Mazatlán travelers from around the United States and Canada, Prossen said.

“It's all about marketing,” Barros said. “It will take two or three years of advertising, branding and packaging to improve their image for U.S. and Canadian consumers.”

It's a message San Antonio and other tourism cities need to remember. San Antonio fortunately has its tourism and convention bureau. With other cities always trying for a bigger piece of the pie, the marketing and advertising can never stop.

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