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Mazatlan Tourism Muscles Into the Future

Mazatlan anticipates the return of cruise ships and the inauguration of an impressive new highway

By
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The industrial city by the sea, Mazatlan, is looking forward to welcoming cruise ships back to the destination. // © 2012 Mazatlan Hotel Association

Mazatlan predates many of Mexico's newer and glitzier resort destinations, such as Cancun and Los Cabos. This industrial city by the sea came by its tourism chops the hard way, building its appeal year-over-year and securing a reputation as an affordable vacation destination.

Mazatlan has its champions; one of whom is Lance Vient. His family-owned Playa Mazatlan resort has been welcoming guests since 1952.

“With all of the seaside resort destinations to choose from, why should a traveler choose Mazatlan?” said Vient. “When I travel, I want to experience a destination. Mazatlan is the real Mexico; it’s not a cookie-cutter destination. Mazatlan is not a brand – it’s a working city on the beach. In Mazatlan, you’ll be immersed in a city

with 300 years of colonial heritage, with nearby Magical Cities to visit and a Golden Zone where you can enjoy being a tourist, with wonderful beaches and great shopping.”

Like many resort destinations in Mexico, Mazatlan has seen its share of bumps in the tourism road over the last couple of years.

“We’re looking at a very good 2012 – when we close the year we’ll be back to visitations levels that are only 2 percent below 2010,” said Carlos Berdegue, vice president of the Mazatlan Hotel Association and the president/CEO of El Cid Resorts. “The bad year for us was 2011.”

In 2011, Mazatlan tourism took a hit when five major cruise ship companies stopped calling on the Pacific Coast resort destination because of a perceived lapse in safety and security. Since then, Prince has resumed including Mazatlan in its ports-of call. Berdegue noted that cruise directors from Carnival Holland America, Norwegian Cruise Line and Disney Cruise Line have recently met with Mazatlan state authorities.

“All of them have said they’re coming back,” said Berdegue. “It’s now a matter of working out the schedule of when they’ll return.”

Berdegue made the point that Mazatlan would actively reach out to the U.S. and Canadian market, instead of retooling its marketing to the Mexico domestic market, as seen in other regions such as Acapulco and Baja California.

“As you know, Mexicans primarily travel at Christmas, Easter and during the summer,” said Berdegue. “You can’t depend on domestic Mexico travel year-round and we have tripled the budget for promoting in the U.S. and Canada.”

Berdegue hinted at significant new access to Mazatlan, to be provided by Virgin America and Aeromexico, although he explained that things were still in the talking stages.

Berdegue also expressed high hopes about the effect the new Mazatlan - Durango Highway will have on Mazatlan's tourism. The Mazatlan - Durango Highway replaces a notoriously dangerous winding road known as the "Devil's Backbone" that crosses the jagged peaks of the Sierra Madre Occidental. Scheduled to open in January, the new highway will shave an estimated six hours off the journey time between Mazatlan and Durango, cutting travel time from eight hours to two. The drive from the Gulf of Mexico to Mazatlan will be reduced to 14 hours. \$1.2 billion was invested in the 45-mile stretch of highway, which contains 63 new tunnels and 11 new bridges, including Latin America's tallest cable-based bridge. Approximately 11 miles of the route will be underground.

"There are a great number of Mexican Americans living in the Durango area," said Berdegue. "This shortened travel time will make it much easier to reconnect with their families in Mazatlan."

Berdegue also anticipates an uptick in U.S. visitors utilizing the highway. The new, high-speed road will be well-lit and patrolled by federal police cruisers. When all is said and done, he predicts a 50/50 split in visitation between Mexican Americans and U.S. travelers utilizing the new highway.

For travel agents who want to share the message of Mazatlan with their clients, there are resources. There are 6,000 U.S. and Canadian citizens who live in Mazatlan on a permanent basis and Mazatlan tourism has been turning to these expats as messengers to carry the news that Mazatlan is a safe destination. The international community in Mazatlan has made a success of MazatlanMyCity.com, a social media and content hub that acts as an interactive gateway into the lives of real people living in the city. The site uses various social networking channels to distribute the content, including video, interactive news, radio programs via its own MazRadio and a cultural calendar promoting special events in the city. While designed for expats and their families abroad, the site is sure to have a ripple effect in spreading reassuring news about the destination.