

Mexico for the wary: A guide to safe, popular travel spots

By Laura Bly and Jayne Clark, USA TODAY Updated 1h 58m ago

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Scared of narco-terrorists? So are we.



By Jayne Clark, USA TODAY
San Miguel de Allende features narrow cobblestone streets and a large expat community.

But that doesn't mean we've written off all of Mexico, where the ramped-up war against and between violent drug cartels has spooked many would-be visitors.

Border areas notwithstanding, "most of the country has a pretty low crime rate," and tourists usually aren't targets, notes international [security expert](#) Bruce McIndoe of IJET Travel Intelligence. "Yes, there's room for collateral damage, but you can get struck by lightning, too."

PHOTOS: Mexico for the wary

Even the U.S. State Department, whose recently expanded warning [cautions against non-essential travel](#) to parts or all of 14 (out of 31) Mexican states, exempts most of the country's marquee tourist spots — including these nine:

Cancun/Riviera Maya

Cancun's manicured beaches, cheap margaritas and plethora of U.S. chain restaurants have helped make it the country's top destination for party-hearty types. But the Caribbean state of Quintana Roo, which runs south to the Belize border, is gearing up for a different celebration. Though some doomsday theorists equate the end of the "Long Count" Maya calendar on Dec. 21, 2012, with the end of civilization, local tourism promoters

beg to differ — and are touting everything from archaeological lectures to a "Mayan Galactic Alignment" cruise.

Riviera Nayarit

Stretching 100 miles along Mexico's Pacific coast from Nuevo Vallarta north to San Blas, this region packs a lot of stylistic variety. Prefer all-inclusive chain [hotels](#)? Try [Nuevo Vallarta](#). If money's no object, slip inside the gated enclaves of Punta Mita. If you like water sports by day and watering holes by night, the town of [Sayulita](#) is your spot. If you're seeking peace and quiet in an artsy village, check into one of San Francisco's (aka San Pancho's) small hotels. Beach options range from secluded, rocky coves to palm-fringed expanses flanked by the Sierra Madres.

Los Cabos

The coastal towns of [Cabo San Lucas](#) and San José del Cabo, connected via a 20-mile expanse of glitzy resorts and gated all-inclusives known as The Corridor, cater to tourists of all stripes — from tequila-swigging spring breakers to privacy-obsessed Hollywood stars. (Arriving in June: global honchos bound for the G20 financial summit.) While desert sun and the turquoise [Sea of Cortez](#) may be the area's biggest draws, up-and-coming San José del Cabo offers free art gallery walks on Thursday evenings from November through June.

Mérida

This colonial city on the [Yucatán Peninsula](#) is the ideal spot from which to explore important Maya archaeological sites like [Chichen Itza](#) and [Uxmal](#). The city has one of the largest historical centers in the Americas (next to [Mexico City](#) and Havana), and many of the Spanish colonial buildings from its wealthy past remain. (Look for carved Maya stones that were used in the

construction of some.) Check into one of many small, elegant hotels downtown near the central square, or stay in the countryside at one of several fabulously restored haciendas.

San Miguel de Allende

Yes, there's a Starbucks. But despite its gringo trappings (and glut of gringo residents), San Miguel retains its essential Mexican colonial loveliness. From its luminescent neo-Gothic church to its shady patchwork of central plazas that are a gathering spot for locals and visitors alike, it's one of the country's most welcoming towns. Visit during "fiesta season" — September through December — when the weather is temperate and there always seems to be a feast, procession or party going on along its cobble streets.

Oaxaca

You could spend days just hanging around the central plaza — one of Mexico's most enchanting. Surrounding restaurants serve spicy, complex molés, among other regional specialties. And the people-watching is superb. But tear yourself away to explore nearby crafts villages whose residents, descendants of Zapotec Indians and other indigenous groups, weave rugs, carve wooden animals, create pottery and more. Also nearby: major archaeological sites such as [Monte Albán](#).

Valle de Bravo

For decades, this scenic 17th-century town of whitewashed buildings with red-tile rooftops has provided a weekend playground for the elite of Mexico City, two hours away. But its fabulous setting on the shores of sparkling Lake Avándaro surrounded by pine-forested mountains is attracting outdoors enthusiasts for paragliding, wakeboarding, mountain biking and more. Pine groves east of town are wintering grounds for millions of monarch butterflies that migrate from Canada, providing a not-to-be-missed spectacle from November through February.

San Cristóbal de las Casas

Though it's not easy to reach — the closest airport in Tuxtla Gutierrez is more than an hour's mountainous drive away — this Spanish colonial outpost and former center of a failed Zapatista uprising in 1994 is well worth the journey. The one-time backpacker and bohemian hangout is now home to upscale boutique hotels and restaurants, and serves as a convenient launch pad for rafting and hiking trips and explorations of traditional Maya-speaking villages. The haunting Maya ruins of Palenque are about a five-hour drive to the northeast.

Loreto

Founded by Jesuit missionaries in 1697 and site of a failed government tourist project that would have turned it into a West Coast [Cancun](#), this small Sea of Cortez town lures kayakers, scuba divers, fishermen and sailors with easy access to what author [John Steinbeck](#) described as an ocean filled with "ferocious life." An uninhabited string of five nearby islands makes up Loreto Bay National Park; about 2½ hours away on the Pacific side of the peninsula, gray whales congregate in protected Magdalena Bay to mate and give birth from January through March.

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