

From the Ground

The Battle for the Truth in Mexico's Drug Wars

by Luke Waterson

(top) A sign at Villa del Oeste near Durango memorialises La Ley del Bravo, one of many iconic westerns shot close by; (right) A hotel owner relaxes in Casas Grandes, a place the US State Department advises against visiting

Fifty-two killed in a Monterrey casino. Thirty-five bodies dumped in the streets of Veracruz. A prominent journalist in Nuevo Laredo assassinated. Numbers of dead from Mexico's drug cartel violence this month alone tell their own appalling story.

No-one would deny that since 2007, the country has been swathed in seemingly-escalating violence, largely a defiant reaction by cartels to President Felipe Calderon's crack-down on drugs.

But a glance at the US State Department website suggests most of Mexico is a no-go zone. Articles scream the country's myriad dangers. I was recently contracted to cover Northern Mexico for a major travel publication. With such headlines and with the north being by some distance Mexico's most troubled region, I thought it an opportune moment to sift truth from fiction in the alarming reports we are spoon-fed by the media.

Take Durango, a city high in the Sierra Madre mountains. The US State Department advises us to 'defer non-essential travel', but while violence has spiked across the state of Durango (an area almost as large as England) the number of tourists injured or murdered remains precisely zero. Moreover, the city itself (the state's biggest tourist attraction) remains a largely peaceful colonial jewel. Within neighbouring Coahuila state, the beguiling city of Saltillo is tarred with the same brush as problem cities Tlaxiaco (250km away) and Ciudad Acuña (500km away) – neither of which are substantive tourist destinations anyway.

Even the Copper Canyon, with its thrilling train ride is listed as risky.

Yet while the region has drug plantations, these are far from tourist centres along the rail route like Creel and Divisadero.

Across Northern Mexico, I found similar situations: entire regions blacklisted for visitors because of violent crimes committed far from the tourist trail: making little more sense than advising against travel to London because of crime in Salford.

Among foreign visitors without connections to drugs, cartels or Mexican law enforcement, there have been few reports of injuries or fatalities in the current wave of violence. Stick to tourist centres, avoid US border towns and don't travel at night or dabble in drugs, and Mexico – north included – is far safer than many places in the world. Fact: the state of Sonora is statistically safer from crime than where its tourism mostly originates from: Arizona, USA.

On-the-ground information from local police and residents is more useful than a media that makes money from selling negative news, or broad-brush crime statistics. Of the places that would normally appeal to visitors, I found that the city of Monterrey and the north-eastern state of Tamaulipas are currently best avoided – and of course those explosive border towns.

So what about the Copper Canyon, the colonial town of Alamos and beach paradises like San Carlos and Bahía de Kino? Well, people are staying away, but with no good reason. Expect fewer tourists and more bargains – the big draws of northern Mexico just got bigger.

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