

# Mexico safer than headlines indicate

Christine Delsol, Special to The Chronicle  
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## Quick - which national capital has the higher murder rate: Mexico City or Washington, D.C.?

If you answered Mexico City, you'd be in good company - after all, Mexico is a war zone, isn't it? But you would be wrong, on both counts.

Based on FBI crime statistics for 2010 and Mexican government data released early this year, Mexico City's drug-related-homicide rate per 100,000 population was one-tenth of Washington's overall homicide rate - 2.2 deaths per 100,000 population compared with 22. (Drug violence accounts for most murders in Mexico, which historically does not have the gun culture that reigns in the United States.)

And while parts of Mexico can be legitimately likened to a war zone, drug violence afflicts 80 of the country's 2,400 municipalities (equivalent to counties). Their locations have been well publicized: along the U.S. border in northern Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas states, and south to Sinaloa, Michoacan and parts of San Luis Potosí, Nayarit, Jalisco, Guerrero and Morelos states.

The flip side is that more than 95 percent of Mexico's municipalities are at least as safe as the average traveler's hometown. Yucatan state, for example, had 0.1 of a murder for every 100,000 people in 2010 - no U.S. tourist destination comes close to that. Most cities in central Mexico, outside of the scattered drug hot spots, have lower murder rates than Orlando.

It would seem fairly clear - fly, don't drive, across the border into the safe regions. Yet whenever people say they are going to Mexico, the invariable response is "Aren't you afraid?"

Media sensationalism accounts for much of the wariness. "Gangland violence in western Mexico"

"Journalists under attack in Mexico" and "Mexico mass grave toll climbs" sound as if the entire country were a killing field. The story might name the state, but rarely the town and almost never the neighborhood. And some reporters apparently are confused by the word "municipality" - some of the killings reported as being in Mazatlan, for example, actually happened in a town miles away from the city - akin to attributing East Palo Alto's slayings to San Francisco.

But the biggest factor may be that travelers looking for a carefree vacation simply find it easier to write the entire country off than to learn what areas to avoid.

The Mexico Tourism Board is working to change that. Efforts so far have concentrated on getting accurate information to travel agents, who funnel the lion's share of tourism to Mexico's popular destinations. Independent travelers' primary source of information is the State Department travel alerts ([travel.state.gov](http://travel.state.gov)), which are finally getting better at pinpointing the trouble spots.

"We are trying to work with U.S. authorities in making these travel alerts specific and not general," said Rodolfo Lopez Negrete, the tourism board's chief operating officer. "Unfortunately, they have projected a somewhat distorted image."

If you're totally spooked, there are places that pose no more risk than Disneyland. If you're open-minded but don't want to take unnecessary risks, we have places safer than Miami, New Orleans or Washington, D.C. For fearless travelers, these sometimes dicey destinations are worth the extra caution.

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