

Are You Safer In Mexico Or America?

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As Lonely Planet's US Travel Editor, I frequently get asked if it's safe to go to Mexico. I have always said that, if you're thoughtful about where you go, the answer is yes. But, after my most recent trip there, I'm answering the question with another question: Do you think it's safe to go to Texas?

To be clear, violence in Mexico is no joke. There have been over 47,000 drug-related murders alone in the past five years. Its murder rate -- 18 per 100,000 according to this [United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime report](#) - is more than three times the US rate of 4.8 per 100,000. Though Mexican tourism is starting to bounce back, Americans appear more reluctant to return than Canadians and Brits (5.7 million Americans visited in 2011, down 3% from 2010 - and, according to Expedia, more than four of five bookings were adults going without children). Many who don't go cite violence as the reason.



What you don't get from most reports in the US is statistical evidence that Americans are *less* likely to face violence in Mexico than at home, particularly when you zero in on Mexico's most popular travel destinations. For example, the gateway to Disney World, [Orlando](#), saw 7.5 murders per 100,000 residents in 2010 according to the FBI; this is higher than Cancun or Puerto Vallarta, with rates of 1.83 and 5.9 respectively, per a Stanford University report (see [data visualization here](#), summarized on this [chart, page 21](#)). Yet in March, the [Texas Department of Public Safety](#) advised against "spring break" travel *anywhere* in Mexico, a country the size of the UK, France, Germany, Spain and Italy combined. Never mind that popular destinations like the Bahamas, Belize and Jamaica have far higher homicide rates (36, 42 and 52 per 100,000). Why the singular focus?

Before you nix Mexico altogether, consider these five things:

1. Mexico may be more dangerous than the US overall, but not for Americans.

According to FBI crime statistics, 4.8 Americans per 100,000 were murdered in the US in 2010. The US State Department reports that 120 Americans of the 5.7 million who visited Mexico last year were murdered, which is a rate of 2.1 of 100,000 visitors. Regardless of

whether they were or weren't connected to drug trafficking, which is often not clear, it's less than half the US national rate.

2. Texans are twice as safe in Mexico and three times safer than in Houston.

Looking at the numbers, it might be wise for Texans to ignore their Public Safety department's advice against Mexico travel. Five per 100,000 Texans were homicide victims in 2010, per the FBI. Houston was worse, with 143 murders, or a rate of 6.8 - over three times the rate for Americans in Mexico.

3. And it's not just Texas.

It's interesting comparing each of the countries' most dangerous cities. New Orleans, host city of next year's Super Bowl, broke its own tourism record last year with 8 million visitors. Yet the Big Easy has ten times the US homicide rate, close to triple Mexico's national rate.

Few go to Ciudad Juarez, a border town of 1.3 million that saw 8 to 11 murders a day in 2010 (accounts differ - CNN went with 8). It's unlikely to ever be a tourism hotspot, but things have been quietly improving there. By 2011, CNN reported, the homicide rate dropped by 45%, and the first six weeks of this year saw an additional 57% drop, per this BBC story.

If that trend in Juarez continues all year, and it might not, the number of homicides would have dropped from over 3000 in 2010 to 710 in 2012. Meanwhile New Orleans' homicide rate is increasing, up to 199 murders last year, equivalent to 736 in a city with the population of Juarez.

4. By the way, most of Mexico is not on the State Department's travel warning.

The best of Mexico, in terms of travel, isn't on the warning. The US warns against "non-essential travel" to just four of Mexico's 31 states (all in the north: Chihuahua, Coahuila, Durango and Tamaulipas). The warning goes on to recommend against travel to select *parts* of other states, but not including many popular destinations such as Puerto Vallarta, Mazatlan, the Riviera Nayarit, Cancun, Cozumel and Tulum.

Meanwhile, 13 states are fully free from the State Department's warning, including Baja California Sur, Yucatan, Mexico City, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guanajuato and others.

5. Malia Obama ignored the Texas advice.

Of all people, President Obama and first lady said "OK" to their 13-year-old daughter's spring break destination this year: Oaxaca. Then Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum made snide remarks over that, perhaps overlooking that Oaxaca state has a smaller body count from the drug war than his home state's murder rate (Oaxaca's 4.39 per 100,000 to Pennsylvania's 5.2).

Oaxaca state, not on the US travel warning, is famed for its colonial city, Zapotec ruins and emerging beach destinations like Huatulco. Lonely Planet author Greg Benchwick even tried grasshoppers with the local mezcal (Malia apparently stuck with vanilla shakes.)

So, can you go to Mexico?

Yes. As the US State Department says, "millions of US citizens safely visit Mexico each year." Last year, when I took on the subject for CNN, one commenter suggested Lonely Planet was being paid to promote travel there. No we weren't. We took on the subject simply because - as travelers so often know - there is another story beyond the perception back home, be it Vietnam welcoming Americans in the '90s or Colombia's dramatic safety improvements in the '00s. And, equally as importantly, Mexico makes for some of the world's greatest travel experiences - it's honestly why I'm in this line of work.

So yes, *you can go* to Mexico, just as you can go to Texas, or New Orleans, or Orlando, or the Bahamas. It's simply up to you to decide whether you want to.

Robert Reid is Lonely Planet's US Travel Editor and has been going to Mexico since he was three (most recently to Chacala).