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The Magic Of Mazatlan (PHOTOS)

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They'll take pesos or dollars in Mazatlan. Even euros, if it comes to that. But smiles are Mexico's most wanted currency. It's the medium of exchange that makes everybody happy. The people I talked to when I was there last month -- from waiters and taxi drivers to museum directors, tuba players and politicians (with the likely exception of policemen and drug dealers) -- wanted to know where I came from and whether I liked their city.

I smiled, they smiled, we said "buenos dias," and shook hands. With that we were "amigos," members of the club. In Mexico, a hearty handshake is *the*

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cultural password, akin to the French air kiss or the American fist bump. Greeting people and exchanging names lays the groundwork for civility. And it made my recent mission to this city's sunny sands that much easier.

What I wanted to know was this: How dangerous is Mexico, and how can visitors avoid trouble? Would the same rules I follow in every large city (including my own) be enough in Mexico? Whether I'm traveling in Paris, Buenos Aires or New York City, I don't wander around alone at night. I stay in busy, well-lit neighborhoods, I don't hang out at bars and I don't look for drug dealers. When I investigated all the available incidents of violence in Mazatlan, most reports suggested that many of the victims didn't play it safe. They were in the wrong place at night or alone or coming out of a bar with friends.

But few of the headlines I've seen reflected those details. Stuff like "Innocent Victim Caught in the Crossfire" and "Gang War Leaves Five Dead" is written to sell newspapers. It's no wonder North American travelers are scared. I was scared, too, though my family has been visiting Mexico since I was in grammar school, and visiting feels like going home.

"Are *you* concerned about safety?" I asked Kurt Miller, a jolly looking man with sandy colored hair, who was sitting next to me in the airport lounge as we waited to board our flight to Mazatlan. "Not worried a bit," he said. "We haven't had any problems in our neighborhood, near the beach. We love everything about this place, the town, our house, the people, the food. Take a look," he added, snapping opening his laptop to show me photos of his vacation home in the El Cid Marina area -- and of a neighborhood party and a smiling chef bringing a birthday cake to the table.

Miller made me feel better. But when you think about safety, it's hard not to be angry. Outraged, actually, because it's us, drug users in the United States, that created the drug trade in the first place. It's our bad habits that turned drug czars into billionaires and paved the way for a plague of fear and brutality. If everyone stopped buying drugs tomorrow -- pot, cocaine and meth -- the cartels would collapse. Not in a day, but soon. It's simple economics. No buyers, no cash revenue, no murders, no more beheaded bodies stuffed into garbage cans.

"I don't know why people here don't get it," said Ashley, the hard-working 24-year old who cuts my hair and remembers a long-ago dream vacation in Ensenada. "It's all our fault. We're just stupid," she told me, stabbing at another piece of hair.

So I went to Mazatlan, had a terrific time and came home feeling like a new person. Mazatlan is still one of my favorite destinations. The honey-colored beaches are broad and clean, the water is warm and the islands offshore slow down the ocean waves, making the surf just tame enough for kids to play in. Along the Malecon -- the beachfront walk -- an assortment of new high rise hotels and restored low rise hotels share ocean frontage with restaurants, shrimp shacks, shops and offices.

In the historic city center, an invigorated community of energetic civic leaders, business owners and artists have restored the central district, starting galleries and restaurants, repainting period buildings, planting flowers, installing benches and cleaning up the two main plazas. I spent a day walking from one block to the next, peeking into private courtyards with fountains and flowers and touring the remodeled and refurbished Angela Peralta Theater. (You might know it as the Opera House.)

Everywhere I went, I asked the same question: "Do you feel safe?" After two dozen interviews -- in shops, on the beach and in restaurants -- it was the Alvaros, a retired Mexican couple who own a condominium in the El Cid Resort who said it best.

"Yes, safety is a concern for some," said Jose Alvaro. "The criminals are bad for business and I hope the government kills them all. But you shouldn't worry if you're staying here near the ocean, where people are on vacation and the streets and hotels are busy. The criminals want to avoid the police."

If you're staying here near the ocean, where people are on vacation and the streets and hotels are busy, the criminals want to avoid the police.

Images by Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld

The Magic of Mazatlan

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