



# IS MEXICO SAFE?

By Skip Mascorro #25225

**THERE HAS HARDLY BEEN A TIME IN MY** life when I was not dreaming of, preparing for or traveling in Old Mexico. My earliest childhood impressions include border town *mercados*, standing breathless atop the towering pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacán, gliding in flower-adorned small boats like the Aztecs along the tranquil canals of Xochimilco near Mexico City, and playing with iguanas on the beaches of Acapulco. These were intoxicating experiences for a small boy. I trace my life long fascination with where the roads of the world might take me to those years. Thanks Mom and Dad!

In 1981 my love affair with Mexico intersected with that of motorcycle touring and the prospects of discovering the planet on two wheels. Over three decades ago, when the number of professional companies offering international motorcycle tours could easily be counted one hand, I took the namesake of a larger than life early 20th

century Mexican folk hero, bandit, revolutionary warrior (take your pick), and created *Pancho Villa Moto-Tours*. That brand would eventually be retired after nearly 20 years in favor of the name MotoDiscovery to better project our global image as a facilitator of adventures beyond just Mexico.

Possibly by default, but I would prefer to believe because we have accumulated a vast wealth of knowledge and experience in all things Mexico and Latin America, I've been asked by BMWON to comment on the question of security in Mexico for the touring enthusiast. The question is not a new one. For 30 years I've fielded almost *ad nauseum* the predictable inquiries about *banditos*, so often that my canned response is, "I would love to meet one!" They must certainly exist. Everyone is asking about them.

As we all know, today in Mexico rival drug gangs are warring to protect a 30 billion dollar business that assures the USA and Canada can keep their "high," and that

the cash flows uninterrupted. The waves of media attention force the question of safety in Mexico and a hard look at the perceptions and the realities. The question requires a serious and thoughtful reply. The fact that MotoDiscovery has for so long been regarded arguably as "experts" in this region of the world also weights our words and comments with the heavy responsibility that men and women could be making travel decisions and judgments hinging on what I say. It is a responsibility I don't take lightly.

The statistics are there, and contrary to the commonly held view, the numbers tell us it is indeed safe to travel to Mexico, at least most areas, keeping in mind that this is a large country of over 761,000 square miles and that the largest portion of the drug violence is being waged in specific northern regions bordering the USA. But statistics also reveal that in line with most parts of the world, there are victims of crime, there

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are opportunists who prey on tourists, especially those who lack common sense and are reckless in their behavior; there is risk. Last January we assessed the risk in riding portions of the northern states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon to be unacceptable and we announced postponement of tour activity there. With that exception, we feel positive about Mexico travel.

If allowed to have perspective, you'll see that a passport is not required to run into trouble. Have you read your local newspaper lately? Let's consider that last year nearly 8 million visitors came to Mexico from the USA, up 19 percent from 2009. Of that number 111 holding US passports were victim by homicide. Some would view this alarming. Some were innocent victims. But of this number, most died as a result of direct involvement with the cartels in illicit activities. Half met their fates in the cities of Tijuana and Juarez on the border. By the way, Boston, Orlando and Las Vegas each had 111 homicides last year (FBI statistics).

It is also important to point out that there is absolutely nothing to suggest that these organized criminal elements are targeting travelers, outsiders and foreigners. To the contrary, such an initiative would prove to bring unwanted heat from all quarters of the international community on cartels that are already suffering from intense pressure from the Mexico authorities and military.

With the many millions who over the years have traveled Mexico trouble free, with an estimated half million to one million (and growing) expatriates living full time or at least much of the year south of the border, then why is it that I'm still being

asked, "what about the *banditos*" The answer is a matter of history and geography and can be found somewhere between the truth and myth that have long been the complexity and mystique of Old Mexico.

Two thousand miles of shared history has us also sharing a turbulent history, that includes disease-bearing and enslaving European *Conquistadors*, three separate invasions by the USA, a failed colonization by France, unrealistic and confusing US State Department warnings, and now from within, warring drug cartels. It is easy to understand why we who reside north of the Rio Grande cling to often skewed notions. Mexico seems like a rough neighborhood. To those who dare cross into Mexico, you can count on being vehemently warned not to. Not surprisingly, this fear-filled advice will come largely from those who have never set foot in Mexico.

Is Mexico safe for motorcycle travel? I believe the answer is, yes! Three decades of relatively trouble free tours with thousands of motorcyclists from around the world have to count for something. But again, it is not without risk and it never has been. That could be said of almost anywhere in the world; certainly as the adventure touring



movement lays tracks to ever more distant corners of the globe, Mexico is probably ranked pretty low on the risk scale, right up there with getting struck by lightning.

As any traveler should do, it is also a matter of weighing in the rewards, what one can expect to gain from the experience in return for a measure of risk. That is why we have a passport. Why we spend hours weaving dreams of faraway places, of encountering magical cultures, making new discoveries, and finding fun even in the most challenging of circumstances. And that is why we love Mexico. It gives us this and much, much more. It is safe to say, we'll be riding there for a long time to come. *Viva Mexico!*



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*Skip Mascorro is founder of MotoDiscovery (formerly known as Pancho Villa Moto-Tours), an early pioneer in the world of organized motorcycle tours beginning with Old Mexico in 1981. Today MotoDiscovery has offerings in most countries of Latin America, much of Eastern Europe, parts of the Middle East, the subcontinent of India and Bhutan. MotoDiscovery has also applied for license with the US Treasury Dept. and soon will operate legal tours to Cuba.*

*Skip's comments are solely his own, and not necessarily a reflection of the BMW MOA, or BMW Motorrad.*