

TRAVEL

Americans weigh in on travel safety

LOS ANGELES TIMES

Should U.S. university student Sarah Tjoa go to Cancún for spring break? She posed that question in a letter to the Los Angeles Times' Travel section. The Times asked readers to weigh in, and here is some of what they had to say.

We just returned from a wonderful vacation on the Riviera Nayarit, one of many trips we've taken to Mexico in the last 30-plus years. We felt very safe everywhere we went. You can be a victim of crime at home or anywhere in the world. What is most important is to be knowledgeable about where you are and to exercise good common sense.

-Gail Mitsui/Glendale, California

As a travel agent and lover of Mexico vacations, I think the reader is being overly cautious. I have traveled to Mexico five times since September 2006 and except for one time in Cabo where someone tried to sell me drugs, I have never felt unsafe, even by myself. (I'm in my mid-20s).

Follow the basic rules: Don't leave drinks unattended, watch your alcohol intake (and don't do drugs), don't walk alone at night, use reputable tour companies when traveling outside the city, etc., and you should be fine.

-Darlene Anderson/Portland, Oregon

Recent conflicts have been in Mexican border towns hundreds of miles from Cancún and the Riviera Maya. Unfortunately, most Americans are ignorant of the geography of Mexico. They do not know that Mexico is three times the size of Texas. If we had unrest in Los Angeles (riots, gang wars, earthquakes) would you cancel your vacation or meeting/convention in Chicago? I do not think so.

In the end, it comes down to common sense.

-Larry J. Pagac/Barcelo Hotels & Resorts/Redondo Beach, California

My husband and I went to Ensenada for three nights during winter break. We caught a bus down south. Tijuana felt deserted and desperate, but the bus ride was surprisingly pleasant (motor coach with movie and bathroom) and Ensenada did not feel unsafe. The tourist strip was clean and inviting at all hours, and during the day we even wandered within a mile radius or so to visit the stores and "loncherias" where locals eat, and we never once felt in harm's way. (And the food was far more satisfying than at the tourist restaurants.)

There was a shooting death in Tijuana while we were in Ensenada, but we never felt that such a thing was imminent. I would encourage people to open their hearts and minds to travel in the non-border towns of Mexico once again.

-Crystal Reed/Santa Monica, California

You can never take caution too far when traveling. It's not as though all these young, inexperienced travelers would stick out, carry money or leave their best judgment at home. ...

-Rhys Logan/Bellingham, Washington

CORRECTION

In the time between the writing and the March 27 publication of a review of the restaurant L'Alsace, the restaurant abruptly closed, citing hardship from the economic crisis. Neither The News nor the author of the review were aware of the closure until we were notified by a reader. We sincerely regret the error.



Three nuns cross the Plaza San Francisco in old Quito, which was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978.

THE HEART AND SOUL OF COLONIAL ECUADOR

The air of Quito may be thin, but its streets are absolutely loaded with history

BY JOHN MITCHELL
Special to The News

One of the first things I did after arriving in Quito was ride the new "teleférico," a cable car that whisks its passengers to a lookout 13,000 feet above sea level.

On the way up, I was treated to a condor's-eye view of this sprawling city tucked into a high valley in the northern Andes. Beneath me lay the church steeples and narrow streets of Quito's historic Old Town, giving way to the shining high-rise buildings and wide boulevards of new Quito. Distant Cotopaxi Volcano shimmered above the city's haze, its snow-clad peak jutting through the shifting clouds like an apparition.

With a population approaching 2 million, Quito is Ecuador's capital and second-largest city. It also claims to be the second-highest capital in the world after La Paz.

Quito's air may be thin, but the city is thick with history. Quito sits on the ruins of an

Inca city that the Incas themselves burned to the ground rather than let fall into Spanish clutches.

The conquistadors established the city of San Francisco de Quito in 1534. They proceeded to evangelize the locals and used them as laborers to build splendid churches, convents and monasteries. Most of these architectural treasures still abound. In fact, downtown Quito is so well preserved it was declared a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site in 1978.

AT ITS HEART, A PLAZA

I felt protected by an angel while wandering through old Quito's plazas and labyrinthine streets. Wherever I went, I could see the winged Virgin of Quito, hovering above the low-rise colonial architecture like a guardian angel.

This huge statue stands on a hill called "El Panecillo" ("Little Bread Loaf") to the south of the old town. It is said to be the only depiction of a winged Virgin in



The winged Virgin of Quito presides over the city.



Quito's new "teleférico," or cable car, whisks passengers to a lookout over 13,000 feet above sea level.

IF YOU GO

Quito's Old Town has few services for travelers. Most stay in the Mariscal Sucre district in new Quito.

This compact neighborhood northeast of the old town is full of budget hotels, restaurants and stores catering to tourists. The best way to get to old Quito from Mariscal Sucre is on the efficient and inexpensive (fare \$0.30) trolley bus system. The

trolleys have their own lanes and can zip right through Quito's frequent traffic jams. Taxis are also cheap and plentiful.

The tourism information office on the Plaza de la Independencia supplies a good map of the Ecuadorian capital and all sorts of brochures. For more information, visit Quito's official tourism Web site at www.QUITO.com.ec.



Musicians perform on a street in old Quito.



THE NEWS GRAPHICS

about, dipping their hands in the splashing baroque fountains, chasing pigeons and dodging people strolling to and from the area's numerous churches.

Quito sits on the ruins of an Inca city.

I soon discovered that it was difficult to walk more than two blocks without bumping into a church. Quito's churches tend to be plain and formal on the outside. However, there is a notable exception just one block west of the Plaza Grande.

La Compañía de Jesús church has the most ornate baroque facade in Ecuador. It reportedly took more than 160

years to build La Compañía and carve the collage of cherubs, sacred hearts and icons ringing its stone entranceway.

The church's gilded nave and towering altar smothered in gold leaf are truly a conquistador's dream come true. Tourism brochures often refer to La Compañía as "Quito's Sistine Chapel." Peering up at the church's vaulted ceiling, I could see why: Moorish geometric designs inlaid with gold glittered in the diffuse light and dozens of somber paintings depicting saints and religious scenes hung from the sweeping arches.

ASQUARE IS ITS SOUL

If Plaza Grande is the heart of Quito, then the Plaza San Francisco is the city's soul.

This vast cobblestone square is ringed by colonial

buildings and bordered on its west side by the high white walls and twin spires of the San Francisco Church and Monastery. The plaza was built on the site of the original Inca city's marketplace - it once buzzed with traders from all over the northern Andes.

When I was there, indigenous women wearing signature narrow-brimmed fedoras approached me hawking multicolored weavings, as men bent double under enormous loads strapped to their backs plodded by. I joined the Sunday crowds filing into San Francisco.

Once inside the church's dark interior, I found myself engulfed by a sea of glinting baroque carvings and the echoes of hundreds of feet shuffling across creaking wooden floors as they have for centuries.

Family Matters

Dr. Marc Ehrlich



Ensuring a healthy office

A salubrious work environment has a natural rhythm, with people knowing their roles and a sense of communal responsibility

There are always conflicts at work. Some are relatively simple to resolve, while others are protracted and destructive for all those involved. While differences of opinion, incompatible objectives and territorial struggles are mostly inevitable within business, there are

ways to ensure that the work environment is sufficiently healthy so as to absorb such conflicts without lasting damage.

The components for a healthy work environment include the following:

1. Task clarity
2. Flow
3. Fluid stream of information
4. Equal value of positions
5. Measurable and unambiguous outcomes

Clarity. There is an ongoing cascade of tasks that need to be done in order for the business to flourish. The issue here is whether there is an agreement as to the "what" of the operation, not so much as to who should actually do it. Professional teams have problems when their members lose sight of the overriding needs of the company and subordinate these greater needs to individual agendas.

Executive teams should specifically address this question: What does the business need from us in order to ensure its continued and sustainable success?

The executives have to learn to "depersonalize" their positions in the company. Tasks need to be accomplished, hopefully by the people best qualified to do them. The individual, however, is not more important than the task itself. With this state of mind, no task is too demeaning and no one is too important to accomplish the established objectives.

Flow. A healthy business environment has a natural rhythm. People do what has to be done in an orderly and predictable fashion, without needing anyone to tell them what to do. Being self-motivated eliminates the destructive habit of hiding from the boss or of management trying to catch the subordinate doing something wrong. Rituals and schedules at work allow for a seamless transition between activities and colleagues.

Doing what has to be done when it has to be done does not eliminate the inevitable glitches in the system. People will still get sick, clients will still not cooperate, bosses will still have a bad day. The rituals and routines provide a stable context within which trust can be developed and sustained. Knowing what to expect from others allows everyone to concentrate on the task at hand.

Fluid stream of information. No one owns information. Except for confidential data, information has to be open and free-flowing. Using information as a power technique, to sabotage the work of another, or to create divisiveness within the department will weaken the fabric of the work setting. A healthy professional environment is helped by information being used to facilitate the success of all those involved in the business.

When there is a culture of trust and cooperation between members of the team, between teams within the same department and between the different areas of operation within the company, the information flow truly becomes fluid. This keeps the business healthy in the same way our body is kept strong by the unobstructed flow of blood.

More next week.