

Response to the Travel Security Alert

In response to the many questions that we have received from you over these last months, we wanted to formally respond with our “in country” take on what is happening here in Mexico. We understand your concern and safety for your group; especially in the wake of the recent heightened press. Even though we can never fully allay our guest's fears, nor make any guarantees, we know that God is on His throne and desires Mexico to be reached.

Pablo and I have partnered with guests from the United States first in Tijuana in the mid-eighties and then here in Ensenada since 1989 and none of our guests or the people that we have worked with have ever experienced any incidents involving violence. Ministry groups have been arriving and serving as usual despite media reports and we haven't seen any changes in the communities we serve.

Following are some thoughts, insight, suggestions and our commitment to you as you come to serve here in Mexico.

1. We believe that God is in control!
2. The toll road to Ensenada skirts the edge of Tijuana and is well patrolled. This is the road that we use to get to and from the border. The alternative Tecate border crossing adds only a few minutes commute south bound and decreases travel time by 20 minutes when traveling north bound. This route is an enjoyable, leisurely drive through vineyard covered hills. The north-bound border crossing back to the states is a breeze! It is important to know beforehand though, that the road to and from Ensenada is a two lane highway so caution must be used. Drive alertly!!
3. We offer to meet groups before the border, escort through immigration, Tijuana and lead caravans all the way to your hotel or to the church.
4. Pablo, myself or church members always accompany groups at ministry sites.
5. When you are traveling in a group, we would advise you to travel with walkie-talkies to keep in contact with others in your caravan with extra batteries at hand!
6. Pablo and I always have local phone contact during ministry times and Pablo has emergency response training. In any emergency situation, we would assist you, having many contacts throughout the city and firsthand knowledge of the hospitals available as well as the ability to deal with any other type of emergency.
7. When visitors are going to stay here in Ensenada in excess of 72 hours, it is important and required by the Mexican government for you to register at the border with the Mexican immigration service and get a tourist visa. This is an added measure of security both for you personally and for Mexico.
8. Following the suggestions from the U.S. Government Travel Safety page, as a precaution I have added the U.S. Embassy - Tijuana phone number to my cell phone 01-52-664-622-7400 and the emergency line for U.S. citizens is U.S. number 619-692-2154. If I ever feel that I am being followed, I will pull into gas

station and call the police. And we also encourage you to follow the suggestions regarding traveling in daylight hours, and preferably not alone and to always try to stay in tourist areas and in areas that you are familiar with. Crime is heightened in the middle of the night.

On a personal note: we have not seen any incidents of violence nor felt personally at risk since most of the incidents have occurred in border towns and have dealt with the drug and turf wars. We cross the Tijuana border twice monthly without incident. We have chosen to raise our families here and we personally drive by ourselves on a daily basis. Rest assured, we would inform you in a heartbeat if there were any known risks. You not only are co-workers, we consider our guests as family.

What do others say about the Mexico safety and security issues?

Troy Harris

Director of risk management from Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California

Westmont College brings over 250 students every spring break to Rancho Agua Viva for over a decade. Troy did a thorough investigation this year:

Sources Consulted

In addition to monitoring public news sources, we have spoken with knowledgeable people "on site" or with expert knowledge to help inform our decisions.

- Westmont alumni ministering in Ensenada
- Potter's Clay core team alumni living in Ensenada and Rosarito
- Several firms:
 - Crisis Consulting International
 - Corporate Risk International
 - Safe Travel Institute
 - United Educators
 - World Vision
 - and others specializing in international safety assessment
- Other schools and ministry programs serving Mexico (Azusa Pacific, Point Loma, et al)
- The US Consulate. Our Risk Manager met personally on 2/6/09 with the US Consul (Deputy Chief of American Citizen Services), whose recommendations for traveler safety are consistent with the plans we've put in place in Tijuana

Their consistent recommendation is to travel by day and stay in groups, which we are committed to doing. They do not regard us as fitting the profile of the drug cartels'

targets for violence, and none of them consider us to be facing a danger that would warrant cancelling the trip.

- Informed sources indicate that most of the violence occurs in the deep night, between midnight and 4am--when our students are inside the gated and locked in Rancho Agua Viva, twelve miles east of the city.
- Azusa Pacific University, which runs a similar but much larger program in Ensenada, Mexicali and elsewhere (and that inspired Potter's Clay in 1977), monitors the situation closely and plans to proceed this year. Here are some recent announcements on their website: 2/9/09, 2/17/09
- Although the Tijuana slayings are spectacular and thus garner media attention, it bears noting that Tijuana's murder rate of about 56 per 100,000 [for 2008] is still far below that of the deadliest U.S. city: New Orleans, which had about 95 killings per 100,000 inhabitants in 2007.
- The US State Dept has not recommended curtailing travel to or thru Tijuana, but instead says travelers must "understand the risks of travel to Mexico, how best to avoid dangerous situations, and whom to contact if one is a victim of crime."

<http://www.westmont.edu/offices/risk/TijuanaTurmoil.html> [2]

Matt Bach

*Sr. Coordinator of Church Relations
Mexico Outreach*

"My recent time in Mexico - what I saw with my eyes, heard with my ears, and experienced by being there, showed something very different than what news reports reflect.

It reminded me of one last contrast: many reports are meant to target the millions of people that vacation and spring break (drinking, clubbing, and partying) in Mexico. Their target audience is not people wanting to spread the Gospel. Had it been, perhaps the media would not sensationalize things as they do, or at the very least they would tell the bigger story. The story of a country similar to our own, where violence exists, but can be avoided by good judgment and common sense. I am more wary of travelling though certain areas of Detroit or Los Angeles than I am of Mexicali or Ensenada."

<http://www.apu.edu/iom/mexout/announcements/13398/> [3]

Linda Sommerville

*Pastor of Adult Ministries
Bayside of West Roseville*

"I have felt safe crossing the border for a few reasons. First, RAV did a good job of prepping us for what to expect at the border. And second, we never stopped in Tijuana,

just drove through on the way to Ensenada. And third, we drove in a caravan to ensure a safer trip."

"We have never had a problem traveling through Tijuana. Basically, you're in and out of Tijuana in the blink of an eye and if you take the main highway, you never actually go through Tijuana, just on the outskirts."

"We do several things to ensure the safety of our group. 1) We always travel in a caravan on the trip to and from RAV. 2) We make sure every vehicle has a walkie talkie (with extra batteries!), all set for the same channel. 3) After every check point, we use the walkie talkies to check in and make sure each vehicle made it through okay. 4) Everyone also carries cell phones as an added precaution in case walkie talkies don't work. We make sure each vehicle has the cell numbers of all the other vehicles. 5) We make sure each vehicle has copies of all the (excellent!) maps provided by RAV - this saves lots of headaches, especially making the quick turn onto the highway in Tijuana and when we travel through Ensenada where it's likely to get separated by traffic lights. 6) We make sure each vehicle has all the passports of each person riding in that vehicle in case they get pulled over by police or have an accident. 7) Most importantly, we pray and trust that our great big God is in charge; and we continually remind ourselves of the fact that every day of our lives is ultimately in His loving and powerful hands."

Allyson Searway

Missionary in Ensenada 20 years
Mother of two children

"I hear the American news reports and I see that the American groups are getting nervous, but I don't feel the threat anywhere around me. My children go places with their friends in Ensenada without incident. We travel to and from San Diego regularly on the toll road around Tijuana without incident. I don't go into Tijuana much and I heed the warning of my Mexican friends to not be out late at night. But if you behave sensibly, travel to and from the Ensenada area is still easy and uneventful."

John Piper in his book "Don't Waste your Life" (page 81): "Risk is woven into the fabric of our finite lives. We cannot avoid risk even if we want to. Ignorance and uncertainty about tomorrow is our native air. All of our plans for tomorrow's activities can be shattered by a thousand unknowns whether we stay at home under the covers or ride the freeways. One of my aims is to explode the myth of safety and to somehow deliver you from the enchantment of security. Because it's a mirage. It doesn't exist. Every direction you turn there are unknowns and things beyond your control. The tragic hypocrisy is that the enchantment of security lets us take risks every day for ourselves but paralyzes us from taking risks for others on the Calvary road of love. We are deluded and think that it may jeopardize a security that in fact does not even exist."

Tony Buslach

Mission Board, First Church of God, Vancouver, WA
Visitors with Siempre Kids Ministries in Tijuana, BC

(Excerpts from an email letter to missionaries with Siempre Kids)

“...In light of the Drug/Law enforcement situation in Mexico, I'm just looking for some reassurance that if we're prudent in our actions, (don't smuggle in firearms, don't make illicit drug deals, don't party at the drug cartel's mansions, don't hang out with the law enforcement folks, obey all laws and keep alert at all times, etc., etc., etc...) we shouldn't have anything to worry about (relatively speaking). I'm not too concerned, but wanted to know how you see it from where you're at. Let me know what you think before we leave...Thanks, Tony”

RESPONSE:

“...just read this email to Debi- we both had a great laugh -think you've got your priorities in order for a safe trip! We were down all day yesterday and it was amazing- Ken was there all day today and had an incredible day. We've still not seen anything more than the amazing increase in law enforcement support- desperately needed...blessings, Eric”

Martha Garcia

Missionary in Ensenada since 1989
Mother of two children

In response to the many questions due to heightened press regarding the increase in crime and conflict in Mexico, I want to express that what you are reading and hearing is news from the U.S. perspective and I hear it daily from the Mexican perspective. I think that a balance is found somewhere in between. I do know that crime has heightened considerably these last years but most all crimes do not involve innocents. The majority of crime is targeted on/from the drug cartels and police force and sometimes innocents get caught in the crossfire. Like one article I read says; "Though there is no evidence that U.S. citizens are specifically targeted, Mexican and foreign bystanders have been injured or killed in some violent attacks, demonstrating the heightened risk in public places.”

Regarding your questions about kidnapping, what I hear on the news and from the people here in Mexico that I have spoken with, is that the majority of targets are business people or politicians, etc. I just try to be as careful as possible and always pray.

I think it is very smart to follow the suggestions regarding traveling in daylight hours, and preferably not alone and to always try to stay in tourist areas and in areas that you are

familiar with. This has been a suggestion in the entire south of the republic for as long as I know - even for Mexican citizens.

I will continue to pray and travel the toll road and keep my doors locked. And as a precaution I have added the U.S. Embassy - Tijuana phone number to my cell phone 01-52-664-622-7400 and the emergency line for U.S. citizens is U.S. number 619-692-2154. If I ever feel that I am being followed, I will pull into a gas station and call the police. I think that these are just good steps to take. I choose to not be afraid - but that is because I live here. However, we must use the brains and resources that God gave us!

Article quoted: http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/pa/pa_3028.html#
