

The challenge of Narco traffickers, Gangs and Cartels to Tourism

By Dr. Peter E. Tarlow

Tourism has long had to deal with a wide variety of violence, from crimes of distraction to terrorism, from forced entry into hotel rooms to shootings many in the tourism industry will state that they have seen it all. In the late part of the twentieth century many tourism officials still believed that their customers feared tourism security. September 11, 2001 was certainly not the first act of terrorism to occur against tourism, but it does mark a major attitudinal change within the industry. From that date on tourism and travel professionals came to understand that their customers no longer feared security; they embraced it. This trend is expected to continue throughout 2008, From Pakistan to Kenya, from South America to Europe visitors will shy away from those parts of the world that cannot provide a feeling of safety and security. This demand for security will increase with the higher cost of travel, and the fact that visitors now fear not only theft but also personal injury. Unless security can be both streamlined and rationalized in 2008, the tourism industry will be hurt. For example, at some point, leisure travelers, and then business travelers, will simply decide that flying is too difficult and the results will be that vacations will become limited to areas within a day's driving distance and teleconferencing will both improve and become a major form of business communication. It should be noted that tourism is not merely pleasure tourism. Business travel is a form of tourism and a visitor to an area may be scouting out that area to determine if it is appropriate for the purposed of investment or economic development. Thus the word tourism is used throughout this article to encompass all aspects of tourism, from leisure travel to business travel.

Recently a new phenomenon has attached itself to the tourism industry. That phenomenon is the drug cartels. The problem of drugs is both similar and different from other crime issues that have confronted travel and tourism in the past. Classical tourism criminals who engage in such as room invasions or robberies, petty theft, pick pocketing have maintained a parasitic relationship with the tourism industry. These criminals understand that their livelihood is dependent on there being large quantities of tourists. As such, although they act as a social cancer within tourism, those who gnaw away at it are also tourism supporters. Terrorism, on the other hand, classically does not seek to profit off of tourism but rather seeks to destroy the industry. The following chart, taken from "Tourism Security and Safety" delineates the differences between classical tourism crimes and acts of terrorism against tourism

1.1 Key Differences between Acts of Tourism Crime and Terrorism

	Crime	Terrorism
Goal	Usually economic or social gain	To gain publicity and sometimes sympathy for a cause.
Usual type of victim	Person may be known to the perpetrator or selected because he/she may yield economic gain	Killing is a random act and appears to be more in line with a stochastic model. Numbers may or may not be important
Defenses in use	Often reactive, reports taken	Some pro-active devices such as radar detectors
Political ideology	Usually none	Robin Hood model
Publicity	Usually local and rarely makes the international news	Almost always is broadcast around the world
Most common forms in tourism industry are:	Crimes of distraction Robbery Sexual Assault	Domestic terrorism International terrorism Bombings Potential for bio-chemical warfare
Statistical accuracy	Often very low, in many cases the travel and tourism industry does everything possible to hide the information	Almost impossible to hide. Numbers are reported with great accuracy and repeated often
Length of negative effects on the local tourism industry	In most cases, it is short term	In most cases, it is long term unless replaced by new positive image

Crime and Terrorism Basics

The above chart demonstrates there is not only a major difference between criminal acts and acts of terrorism, but also that there are different remedies to deal with these two very separate social illnesses. Criminal acts then require well-trained police forces. The

emphasis is both on displacement (that is hardening the target so that the victimizer goes somewhere else) and on active prevention. Dealing with crime requires clear guidelines in which police, security professionals, legal professionals (such as district attorneys) and the industry work together. Terrorism, on the other hand, is more warlike in nature. Its goal is destruction through victimization and requires a whole host of counter-measures including cooperation with the media.

Added to this mix is the issue of illegal drugs. In reality tourism faces not one but several drug problems especially in those areas of the world in which drug cartels have become a major political force.

Tourism's manifest drug problems fall into the following categories:

- The seeking of Drugs by tourists
- The destruction of tourism security due to violence stemming in those areas of the world dominated by drugs trafficking. The violence often produces secondary impacts including:
 - Loss of reputation due to violence in cartel dominated areas
 - Lowering of customer service in cartel dominated areas.

Cartels also pose an additional threat to tourism. In other aspects of tourism security it is assumed that both police officers and private security tourism experts have high degrees of integrity and are loyal to the rule of law and order. Based on this assumption, a normal procedure for assuring tourism security is the training of personnel. This assumption simply does not hold true in those areas impacted by drug cartels. For example in Latin America the phrase “plata o plomo” (take the money or take a bullet) is often presented to underpaid police officers. When dealing with tourism security (especially the business variety) it is necessary to concentrate on the people who may threaten visitor security rather than on the objects that may cause harm. That means not only better-trained personnel, but also determining which personnel are trustworthy and which personnel may be acting as cartel agents in the guise of security professionals. Psychological methods must then first be employed to determine who in the police and professional security agencies may be a threat to the people they are supposedly protecting.

Drug Usage among tourists

While the main focus of this paper is on the impact of narco trafficking on tourism it would be wrong not to note that there are clearly tourists and visitors who seek illegal drugs. Tourism and Visitor professionals have long known that people tend to lower their inhibitions when traveling away from home. This inhibition lowering occurs in all forms of tourism, be that tourism of the leisure variety or business variety. It should be noted that not every traveler will lower his inhibitions or moral standards, but rather travel provides those wishing to engage in such actions the opportunity to do so. It is in this context that some people who are away from home may seek out illegal drug usage opportunities resulting in arrests, robberies or even physical harm.

Influence of Narco Trafficking on tourism

As stated previously narco trafficking can have a ruinous impact on a tourism center. A good example of this negative impact is Latin America. Some of the main impacts of Narco trafficking on tourism are:

Loss of Security

- Increase in carjacking
- Increase in kidnappings (especially business travelers held for ransom)
- Loss of the leisure travel business due to negative publicity
- Loss of reputation leading to fear on the part of foreign investors
- Loss of legitimate employment for locals
- Loss of confidence in local authorities
- Increase in industrial crimes
- Infiltration into governments and protection agencies leading to loss of confidence and a state of ennui

An example of these phenomena is the Northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Nuevo Laredo sits in an ideal location. Directly across the border from Laredo, Texas, it is the entranceway to Mexico. Millions of dollars of goods daily pass across the US-Mexican border at the Laredo/Nuevo Laredo check point. Nuevo Laredo used to be a tourism center as well. Its main handicraft market was in easy walking distance of the border, its main street was filled stores selling Mexican products (from “sarapes” to “kaluha”) and at night its restaurants were filled with visitors from around the world, as well as business people bringing goods across the border. Due to its proximity the US markets Nuevo

Laredo was a center for joint production plants called “maquiladoras.” Tourists and business people passed easily across the border, and while the city was never free of violent crime, most visitors felt safe in its well-patrolled tourism districts.

Approximately, 6 years ago, the drug cartels began to move into Nuevo Laredo. Nuevo Laredo was/is a perfect location for them. From the cartels’ perspective Nuevo Laredo was located directly across the border from a major drug-consuming nation. The border was poorly protected and the main highway, I-35 runs from the Canadian Industrial heartland through major US manufacturing cities ending in Mexico’s major industrial city of Monterrey. There is no reason to believe that these cartels were especially interested in tourism. Thus, the cartels’ impact on travel and tourism is of an indirect or secondary nature. Nevertheless, no matter what the cartels’ motivation is/was, their impact on tourism has been staggering.

The narco traffickers did not attack tourism directly. Rather Nuevo Laredo became a center of narco trafficking resulting in a rise of violence. This violence caused Nuevo Laredo to begin its downward spiral. As violence increased, tourists and business people began to fear coming to Nuevo Laredo. Soon its main street, Guerrero, a bustling center of activity began to lose its charm and with the loss of security, its visitors. The loss of visitors resulted in large numbers of tourism-oriented business either having to cooperate with the narco traffickers or go out of business. While the city was losing its tourism reputation, the cartels soon infiltrated the local police departments. Thus, US police agencies, which had gone to Mexico to train Mexican police, now found themselves in the shocking position of having trained the very people against whom they were fighting. Perhaps the most classic example of this unintended consequence is the famous gang/cartel known as the “Zetas.” The level of police corruption in Nuevo Laredo reached such heights that the Mexican government was forced to send in Federal troops to take back control of the city. To add to the city’s woes both kidnappings for ransom and recreational kidnappings began. In the latter form of kidnappings women were abducted for sexual pleasure and often given as “Christmas presents” between the narco traffickers. To complicate the situation still further the cartels often developed affiliated gangs (or self generated gangs entered into the drug trade) causing not only direct attacks on legitimate visitors and businesses, but also gang wars for territorial control. These gang wars were amply covered by the Mexican media and thus reinforcing the image of northern Mexico as a place to avoid. Due to the fact that tourism reputations are both tenuous and fragile it is not difficult to imagine that the whole of Mexican tourism will be impacted

In our modern age of tourism and terrorism and tourism and crime, tourism security will become a major part of the tourism industry especially in those areas impacted by drug cartels. That means that the tourism industry dare not ignore the drug wars that surround it. It also means that before police and fire professional receive better trained and equipment officers that the ways must be found to ferret out the honest police officers from the less honest ones and that salaries must be at levels that challenge economic temptations. In 2008, the fate of the world's largest industry may depend on how well tourism professionals meet the moral and security challenges posed by cartels, gangs, and narco trafficking.

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