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JANUARY 10, 2022

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*This crucial destination will
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Metropolitan Cathedral Maria de Assuncao in Mexico City. Photography by Andre Nery/stock.adobe.com.

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What Mexico Travel Will Look Like In 2022

This crucial tourism
destination will
continue to
evolve to meet
today's challenges

BY MARK CHESNUT





Main image: Tourism to Costalegre is expected to increase. Top, from left: Food and wine travel is a major trend; Puerto Vallarta continues to draw visitors; Cancun's hotels have adjusted to pandemic regulations.

AS INTERNATIONAL VISITOR NUMBERS CONTINUE TO GROW, Mexico's tourism industry is likely to witness continued recovery in 2022, according to most predictions. But the nation's success as a vacation destination depends on a variety of ever-changing factors.

To keep Mexico on a positive track, those who sell and market the destination to leisure travelers are focusing on everything from evolving traveler preferences and niche markets to technological advances, connectivity and continued pandemic protocols.

"Mexico is going to be one of the big destinations for 2022, as it has been over the entire pandemic," said Harry Hastings, founder of Plan South America, a tour operator that offers programs in multiple Mexican destinations. "This is driven in large part by its appeal to freelancers and digital nomads, which has skyrocketed over the past couple of years."

At a time when many nations still require testing or restrict entry in other ways, ease of access is an important selling point for Mexico, according to Andrea Norfolk, president of Shoreline Destinations in Finksburg, Md.

"People are open to looking at Mexico because a PCR or antigen test is not required to enter the country, and people want to be able to travel easily without the need for tests," she said.

Indeed, pandemic-era restrictions and concerns will continue to influence travelers' decisions this year, according to Zachary Rabinor, president and CEO of Journey Mexico, a tour operator that has revamped its offerings in response to strong customer demand.

"We've made a massive shift in product mix to meet the new pandemic mindset, [with] private homes and villas; beach and remote, secluded destinations; and wildlife adventure activities," he said. "I think we'll continue to see the fluctuation between pandemic and pre-pandemic mindsets through the winter months, which will gradually evolve or return to pre-2020 patterns."

Current trends in Mexico are in line with the latest global tendencies, according to Fernando Luis, vice president and commercial director for the Caribbean and Latin America at Hilton.

"We are seeing travelers seek out experiences that provide a sense of purpose, focus on wellness, are pet-friendly, provide unique culinary experiences or deliver on a desire for truly authentic moments," he said, citing the findings of Hilton's latest report, *The 2022 Traveler: Emerging Trends and the Redefined Traveler*.

Bigger Budgets

Sam Concur, the business travel expense management company, predicts that 2022 will be the year of the bucket-list trip. For Mexico-bound travelers, that is likely to mean increased budgets, according to Heather Keller, co-founder/travel advisor at Perfect Landing Travel, an affiliate of

Lucas, Riviera Nayarit and Riviera Maya, there are incredible resort options that rival luxury properties in the Caribbean. Now, my clients are more open than ever to learn about some of my favorites throughout Mexico."

Tour operators are responding to demand, too.

"We've seen increased interest in Mexico's bucket-list experiences, including seeing the Monarch butterflies and Baja's gray and blue whales; glamping in Baja; swimming in cenotes (underground swimming spots) in the Yucatan; and visiting the more remote, culturally rich destinations of Chiapas, Oaxaca and the Yucatan Peninsula," said Journey Mexico's Rabinor. "There's definitely a notable increase in average spend and willingness to splurge for unique experiences, upgraded room categories, private aviation, yachts and other luxury services."

Similarly, Intrepid Travel has expanded its luxury options in Mexico.

"We expect this surge in visits to continue into 2022," said Matt Berna, managing director of North America for Intrepid. "Generally, we've shifted our focus more to active travel, as well as higher-end travel via our new Intrepid Premium range, which includes two amazing new itineraries in Mexico."

Plan South America is also offering more high-end accommodations.

"Our older travelers are looking for fully staffed luxury haciendas and beach houses and sticking to one or two places," Hastings said. "We've really had to ramp up our villa portfolio to meet demand."

Abercrombie & Kent, meanwhile, is offering one of the swankiest options: a 12-day Wings Over Mexico itinerary, limited to 12 guests with prices starting at \$27,995 per person. The tour includes

Esponda, managing director of the Los Cabos Tourism Board, who noted the growing popularity of places such as Cabo Pulmo National Park. "Sustainability has to be at the forefront of what we need to consider as a destination."

Individual hoteliers are also touting their sustainable practices and design. In Merida, Yucatan, for example, the recently opened Wayam Mundo Imperial is billed as the first LEED-certified hotel in the city, and the new Etereo, Auberge Resorts Collection, located in the Riviera Maya development called Kanai, has a resident team of botanists focused on biodiversity conservation.

Advisors who sell Mexico will also find new ways to connect their clients with Mexican culture and local communities. Palmaia – The House of AIA, which opened in 2020 in Playa del Carmen, is launching a program that allows guests to meet elders from the local Maya community. In the nation's capital, meanwhile, Presidente InterContinental Mexico City has launched a new artistic partnership with Mexican artist Pedro Friedeberg to exhibit original artwork and design throughout the property this winter, part of the hotel's ongoing art-based initiatives.

Wellness and Nature

After dealing with months of pandemic health concerns, it's only natural that travelers are in the mood for healthy, outdoor activities.

"Clients are looking for more active, adventurous, nature-based itineraries after such a lengthy period of lockdowns, as well as a more meaningful and ethical experience that gets them under the skin of a destination," said Intrepid Travel's Berna. "This is what we specialize in via our authentic SERTs – sustainable, experience-rich travel – and so we believe we're ideally positioned to deliver what customers are looking for."

Rocio Lancaster Jones, tourism undersecretary for the state of Jalisco, agrees about the increased demand for nature-based and wellness travel.

"The popularity of nature tourism has led to an increase in glamping opportunities – camping with the luxuries of a hotel," she said.

Jones cited examples including Estela Bubble Glamping, which offers four "bubbles" in the town of Mazamitla, and Sky Tequila Glamping, a 20-tent venue that offers activities including horseback riding and tequila tasting.

Emerging Destinations

While smaller destinations often could not compete with the popularity of more developed beach hot spots, travelers are more likely to seek out new experiences in lesser-known places this year, according to some observers.

"I am eager to see more people branch out of all-inclusive-only travel to Mexico in mid-to-late 2022," said Katie Kubitskey, owner and operator of My World Travel in Louisville, Ky. "Since the beginning of the pandemic, Mexican resorts and resort towns were ahead of the curve in offering

"We've seen increased interest in Mexico's bucket-list experiences ... There's definitely a notable increase in average spend and willingness to splurge for unique experiences."

Departure Lounge in Houston.

"The big shift we've seen is definitely higher spend overall, because of a few factors," she said. "Pricing is up, clients are spending what they had saved for last year and didn't use, and they're traveling longer. We're also getting a lot more requests for the bigger, bucket-list trips people usually have on the back burner for 'someday.'"

Shoreline's Norfolk has witnessed such a strong surge of upscale bookings in Mexico that she decided to plan an ambitious itinerary of site inspections, visiting more than 30 properties in just one month, to boost her knowledge and sales skills.

"I've presented more luxury-based trips to Mexico than ever before," she said. "Between Cabo San

private charter flights linking Mexico City, Colima, Oaxaca, Palenque and Merida, and visits to archeological sites at Monte Alban, Palenque, Uxmal and Kabah.

Sustainability and Authentic Experiences

A recent study by Google found that travelers in 2022 are more likely to seek "meaningful and purposeful" experiences, and organizations around Mexico are making it easier for vacationers to interact in a positive way with the destinations they visit.

"People are already excited about sustainability, but you have to make it accessible," said Rodrigo

on-site, rapid COVID-19 testing for travelers. Since then, Mexico's tourism agencies across the country have done such a wonderful job making COVID-19 testing accessible to those staying in home rentals, Airbnbs and [smaller] hotels. With that — plus the ease of getting to Mexico from most major U.S. cities — I think we'll see a lot more localized travel to less-visited Mexican towns."

Kubitskey added that she plans on building more vacations to places outside the Riviera Maya, including Mexico City for local culture and arts, Oaxaca for food travel and Guadalajara for tequila tastings and mariachi.

Hilton's Luis agreed about the appeal of Mexico's non-beach destinations.

"Recently, we've started to see growing interest in travel to Mexico's most popular cities, such as Guadalajara and Mexico City, as well as an increase in business travel," he said.

New infrastructure investment, meanwhile, can make it easier for travelers to reach some lesser-known regions. The much-discussed Mayan Train, part of which may open next year, will link several destinations around the Yucatan Peninsula, while American Airlines' new nonstop service between Miami and Chetumal is already increasing accessibility to the southern part of Quintana Roo.

On the Pacific Coast, the pending opening of a new commercial airport in Costalegre, south of Puerto Vallarta, will likely boost arrivals and development in a region already known for its upscale offerings.

Hoteliers are also investing in new ways to lure visitors to less touristy destinations. In the state of Queretaro, for example, Fiesta Americana Hacienda Galindo Resort & Spa now offers a wine therapy treatment, taking advantage of the property's location near one of Mexico's growing wine regions. In a similar vein, Grupo Posadas — which owns the Fiesta Americana brand as part of its La Coleccion Resorts portfolio — will open the 69-room Live Aqua Valle de Guadalupe in 2023, in a Baja California region known for its vineyards. Nearby, the Banyan Tree Valle de Guadalupe Resort, Spa and Winery is also slated to open next year.

New Travel Time Frames

The pandemic has encouraged travelers to experiment with shorter booking windows, longer stays and remote working and studying, and they are likely to continue reconsidering the time frame of their trips, according to Keller of Perfect Landing Travel.

"We've been seeing requests for longer stays," she said. "Being based in Houston, many times our clients would hop on a flight and do a long weekend



Left: Culturally rich destinations, such as Chiapas, are increasingly popular. **Below:** More people are visiting off-the-beaten-track spots, such as Monte Alban in Oaxaca.



in Mexico, but now we're seeing them take more time to enjoy where they are."

Travelers will also continue to expect greater flexibility from suppliers, according to Lizzie Cole, executive director of promotion at the Quintana Roo Tourism Board.

"Flexible travel will be a key term for 2022," she said. "Considering the ongoing popularity of remote work and 'bleisure,' yet also keeping in mind how global travel restrictions can quickly change, travelers are seeking flexibility in booking trips. They are looking to book less in advance and to have more ease in their itineraries. Hotels and travel providers will keep flexible travel in mind."

Health and Safety Concerns

It is no surprise that health and hygiene continue to be a concern for travelers. In a recent survey by Google, 70% of respondents said that a travel brand's "respect" for COVID-19 safety guidelines plays a significant role in their booking decisions.

Destination and private-sector responses are crucial at a time like this, according to Cole.

"Travelers are still being cautious in terms of social distancing and outdoor activities, which the Mexican Caribbean is naturally ideal for," she said. "Many travelers are now more interested in

intimate, one-on-one tours and activities instead of group settings."

Technology will continue to play a key role in hygiene protocols, Cole adds.

"QR codes will keep growing in popularity, from hotel check-in to restaurant menus, payment and more," she said. "Touchless tech is also a time-saver for travelers, as they can manage many elements of their trip on their phones. Our Guest Assist app, for example, provides assistance to travelers with a 24/7 hotline and important safety information."

Hoteliers around Mexico have taken the lead on technology implementation, too. La Coleccion Resorts, for example, uses a contact-free digital welcome process at nearly 100 of its hotels, while Bahia Principe Hotels & Resorts is one of many to follow international guidelines to receive multiple seals of approval for hygiene and sustainability.

Richard Zarkin, public relations manager at the Riviera Nayarit Conventions and Visitors Bureau, expects pandemic-era protocols to be a fact of life throughout 2022, but he predicts they will be more manageable.

"These things will still be important to keep people safe," he said. "But I think it's going to be managed much better than last year." ●