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THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY'S MOST VOICED

A NEW VERTICAL FOR AIRLINES

Major carriers are placing bets on a future where travelers use small, fast, emission-free aircraft to bypass congested roadways on their way to the airport.

BY ROBERT SILK

Airlines retire their smallest planes, raising concerns for regional markets

By Robert Silk

United's late June announcement that it will pare down its fleet of 50-seat aircraft by approximately 200 by 2026 continues a long-term trend by U.S. airlines away from 50-seat service.

But how will small cities be impacted as airlines increasingly upgauge their smaller, regional jets for 76-seat aircraft?

The answer, said Faye Malarkey Black, CEO of the Regional Airline Association (RAA), will depend upon the city.

"When upgauging happens because of market characteristics and demand, that is a good thing," Black said.

But she added that some communities are best served by smaller jets. So if airlines move to large planes for secondary reasons, including to drive down costs or to stay compliant with union contract clauses — known as scope clauses — that cap regional aircraft fleet sizes, the results are often problematic. Negative outcomes for small markets include losing frequencies, routes or, in the worst cases, air service entirely.

According to data compiled by the RAA, between 2008 and 2020 the number of 50-seat Bombardier CRJ-200 aircraft flown by U.S. carriers declined by more than 60%, as airlines increased their flying in dual-class. See **REGIONAL JETS** on Page 26

AN ANTICIPATED SHIP MAKES ITS DEBUT

Onboard Carnival's Mardi Gras: A bigger, better type of Fun Ship

By Tom Strieghorst

ABOARD THE MARDI GRAS — Let's be clear: This isn't the Carnival Mardi Gras, the ship that launched Carnival Cruise Line in 1972, but simply the Mardi Gras, a bigger and better kind of Fun Ship arriving on the eve of the line's 50th anniversary.



At 6,500 passengers and 180,000 gross tons, it's one of the biggest cruise ships to be launched during the pandemic. And with features ranging from the environmental (engines powered by liquefied natural gas) to the passenger (a roller coaster ringing the top deck) it's easily one of the most anticipated cruise ships of the year.

The Mardi Gras continues Carnival's evolution away from pop architecture toward less novelty and over-the-top zaniness in design. Still fun but not See **MARDI GRAS** on Page 26

ON THE RECORD

AMResorts' Erica Doyne on the creation of the AMR Collection master brand. **2**

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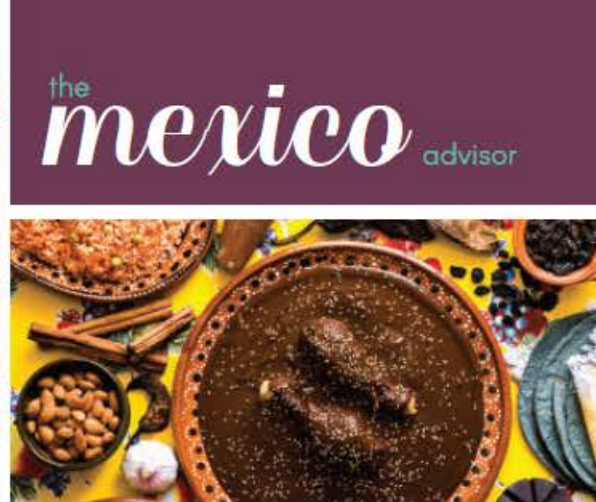
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MARK PESTRONK

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SPECIAL SECTION

the
mexico advisor



HOW *mexico* IS BETTER THAN EVER

BY MARK CHESNUT

Mexico is in growth mode. According to the Ministry of Tourism (SECTUR), the nation could reach 42.7 million international arrivals this year, which would be an impressive 65 percent increase over 2020's decidedly dismal numbers. And now, as the world's tourism industry kicks back into gear, Mexico's public and private sectors are devising new strategies for growth.

Compared to many nations, Mexico is already playing with a good hand when it comes to rebuilding a strong tourism industry. For one, the destination enjoys an especially high profile on the tourism map today, in large part because it never fully closed to visitors during the pandemic. In 2020, Mexico became the third most-visited country in the world. And now, even though Mexico's Ministry of Tourism predicts that the nation's tourism industry won't fully recover until 2023, many observers are optimistic about continued growth.

To assure a swifter recovery, many Mexican tourism offices and suppliers are setting new courses for success. Among the most visible efforts is the recent creation of Visit Mexico, an organization launched by Braintivity, a private tourism company contracted by the Mexican government to oversee the nation's tourism branding and promotion. As the only

government-appointed organization tasked with representing the nation of Mexico as a tourist destination on the international front, Visit Mexico is taking on some of the responsibilities once handled by the now-defunct Mexico Tourism Board — including updating the [VisitMexico.com](https://www.visitmexico.com) website.

"It's a very interesting initiative, because we have a lack of resources on that page," says Enrique Calderon, COO of Grupo Posadas, which owns Fiesta Americana, Grand Fiesta Americana and Live Aqua, all of which are part of the company's La Colección resort group. He notes that a comprehensive marketing strategy for the entire nation is especially important for smaller destinations. "Probably the destinations that have suffered the most are the Ixtapas, the Huatulcos, the Manzanillos," he says. "They don't have enough resources to promote themselves and they've completely lost the representation they used

to have with the Consejo [Mexico Tourism Board]."

While the full effects of Visit Mexico's initiatives remain to be seen, tourism offices and suppliers around the nation are continuing with their own steps to grow arrivals and increase business. Here are some of the biggest changes in how Mexico is being marketed and sold.

NEW MARKETING APPROACHES

Suppliers and destinations around Mexico are rethinking how they market themselves. Grupo Posadas and La Colección, for example, have redirected some of their efforts at travel advisors who previously specialized in cruises, with the idea that those who've lost sales due to cruise suspensions need new revenue sources, according to Calderon. "All this time they've been looking for something to sell, so [our] incentives can help travel agents get some income," he says, noting the appeal of the La Colección rewards incentive program, which pays at the time of booking, rather than when the client travels.

Calderon says that his company has also become more effective at engaging with travel advisors. "While everyone was isolated, there were more op-

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FEATURING THE BEST OF
mexico

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portunities to have sales calls,” he explains. “Instead of visiting one travel agent and then another and another, we increased a rotation, because it was more effective to see more people at the same time. We now have better engagement with the travel community than we had before.”

Several destinations are already seeing benefits from changing their positioning within the marketplace. “We are improving faster than we thought,” says Germán Ralis, tourism secretary for the state of Jalisco. One of the new goals, according to Ralis, is to convince more travelers to take multi-destination vacations around the state, which is home to Puerto Vallarta, Guadalajara, Tequila and Costalegre.

Jalisco has a unique advantage over other destinations, according to Rocio Lancaster, the state’s tourism undersecretary. “We want to sell the destination as a multifaceted experience, not just ‘I’m going to the beach and that’s it,’” she says. “We have the beach and the magical towns and the capital, Guadalajara.” To make it easier for travelers, both the Puerto Vallarta and Guadalajara airports are conducting major upgrades slated to finish in 2024, while a new airport is underway in Costalegre — a coastal region where new luxury hotel properties are also in the works.

Within the state of Jalisco, Puerto Vallarta also has its own new marketing approach. “We launched the REVIVE campaign in September 2020 with a long-term strategy to build on its central message: revive your desire to travel, putting travelers at the center of the destination’s revival and focusing on its hospitality, natural charm and essence,” says Luis Villaseñor, managing director at Puerto Vallarta Tourism. “In 2021, we are reinforcing that messaging and expanding our marketing efforts as international travel sentiment grows and an increasing number of vac-

inated Americans are resuming their adventures.”

The Acapulco Tourism Board (FIDETUR), this summer will unveil a new marketing campaign, with a revamped website and branding. Based on results from traveler surveys conducted in April and May of this year, the new approach focuses on a variety of

Acapulco-specific segments including weddings, romance, adventure travel and meetings. In addition, the campaign features new partnerships with companies including United Airlines, which recently increased service between Acapulco and Houston; Mobility ADO, which owns the long-distance bus company ADO; and Aeromar, the Mexican airline.



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Cancun’s beloved resort’s newly expanded guest offerings provide even more luxurious amenities, dining outlets and bespoke experiences.

Located on Cancun’s most secluded stretch of white-sand beach, the award-winning Grand Fiesta Americana Coral Beach Cancún All Inclusive Spa Resort has reemerged with a reimagined guest experience and a “luxury with no limits” all-inclusive resort under the brand concept, Infinite Luxury[®] by Grand Fiesta Americana. Offering the same signature cuisine and unparalleled service, this new concept now features a greater abundance of guest experiences.

In addition to luxurious accommodations in one of the resort’s 602 oceanfront suites — with a private terrace and stunning views of the turquoise Caribbean and lagoon-like pool — Infinite Luxury[®] by Grand Fiesta Americana includes an incredible array of dining and drinking options at a dozen restaurants and bars, access to theme parties, and a variety of snack experiences and beverages. The amenities and activities are truly infinite, with nonmotorized water sports, fitness classes, and unlimited access to the state-of-the-art fitness center and interactive Coral KidZ Club Cancun.

For those seeking the ultimate indulgence, there is the Infinite

Club. Packed with lavishly upgraded experiences, Infinite Club guests unlock a host of exclusive privileges, amenities, suites and excursions. In addition, guests enjoy an expanded selection of premium spirits and cocktails throughout the entire resort, as well as an elevated in-suite minibar.

Already known for its excellent cuisine at the AAA Five Diamond Le Basilic and the upscale Mexican La Joya, the resort has expanded its dining options this year to include more than half a dozen choices, with the introduction of both new and recreated spaces. New dining options range from the formal Tuscany Trattoria, offering timeless Italian cuisine in an upscale setting to the Tuscany Terrace featuring classic Italian fare in a more casual atmosphere, as well as the new Theme Nights. Also new this season, The Table — a video mapping experience — has a new dedicated location providing guests with a complete 360-degree immersive experience and live entertainment.

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"Our team was searching for a meaningful approach to portray Acapulco as the ideal, must-visit Mexican destination following the unprecedented times that the entire world has faced," says Daniel Torres D'Elia, operations director of FIDETUR. "Travel has changed for good, and we felt obliged to reinvent ourselves with the industry by renew-

ing how we present Acapulco to the world. Traveler expectations are higher than ever, and we needed an uplifting campaign that better personified our destination and what it offers."

"Beyond Acapulco's new branding, we have begun to implement partnerships with U.S. travel industry

leaders, such as United Airlines, to continue to build momentum and generate awareness of our city's connectivity," Torres adds. "Before the end of the summer, Acapulco and United will together launch a digital and airport display advertising campaign focusing on major U.S. hubs such as Dallas, Houston, New York and Charlotte."



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A new marketing campaign is also a key component of the growth strategy for the Los Cabos Tourism Board, according to Rodrigo Esponda, the organization's managing director. "We just launched a new marketing campaign, 'Set Yourself Apart,'" he says. "While we've remained constant in positioning Los Cabos as a luxury destination, we've continued to tailor our message as consumer sentiment changes around travel. In this campaign, we want our audiences to know that Los Cabos is the perfect destination to welcome them back to travel, and it will make for a trip well worth taking. Los Cabos sets itself apart in natural beauty, hotels, gastronomy, experiences and more."

To help travel advisors sell more Los Cabos, the tourism board launched a revised Los Cabos Specialist Program in June. "Travel Agents will have the most up-to-date resources at their fingertips," Esponda says. "We offer guides, maps, video, images and a new B2B Marketplace, where specialists can interact directly with destination suppliers. The program has a revamped loyalty component for travel advisors, offering a more robust experience for being an expert on the destination."

Esponda notes. "Following the dissolution of the Mexico Tourism Board, the Los Cabos Tourism Board opened up an international trade office in Los Angeles in September 2019 to support the increased challenge to reach our market," he says. "The office works closely with business partners and travel and tourism operators to increase visibility of the destination. This international expansion positioned Los Cabos as the only travel destination in Mexico to establish

a promotional office of its kind at the time, providing in-market and personalized support to the growing demand of travelers from the state of California, which accounts for 40 percent of visitors to the destination.”

Mexico’s Caribbean coast is also taking a strategic approach to fostering growth. The Quintana Roo Tourism Board’s Mexican Caribbean campaign, “The Best of Two Worlds,” showcases the region’s strengths in a variety of travel segments, including vacation rentals, golf, wellness and meetings. In addition, to get the word out to travel advisors, the organization has been hosting virtual seminars since May 2020 and participates in virtual tourism fairs. Tourism officials also tout the appeal of its new hotel offerings, including Nickelodeon Hotels & Resorts Riviera Maya, which is scheduled to open this summer, two new La Coleccion hotels (the Live Aqua Beach Resort Tulum Riviera Maya, slated to open this summer and the Fiesta Americana Tulum Riviera Maya, scheduled to open in the fall) and Hotel Xcaret Arte, a 900-suite, adults-only property affiliated with the popular Grupo Xcaret theme parks, which opened in July.

Nearby, the state of Yucatan has also developed an extensive economic and tourism recovery plan, focused heavily on growing airlift and cruise arrivals. American Airlines recently launched new service from Dallas/Fort Worth to Merida, while Carnival Cruise Line has announced that Puerto Progreso, Yucatan’s coastal cruise destination, will be a stop on its western Caribbean itineraries. In addition, the state’s secretary of tourism, Michelle Fridman, recently participated in the annual summit of the Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association, to generate interest in the state’s selling points as a cruise destination, and Routes Americas 2021, the air service development conference, to discuss the potential for additional air service.

EVOLVING TRAVELER INTERESTS

Whether it’s the result of pandemic-era concerns or simply changing trends, today’s travelers are evolving, and that’s creating new opportunities for those who sell Mexico as a vacation destination.

“The COVID-19 pandemic brought tremendous

challenges but also uncovered growth opportunities and niche markets,” says Esponda. “First, travelers today are looking for exclusive activities and personalized experiences that can be enjoyed alongside their families — for many, it will be the first time they vacation together after the pandemic. Los Cabos’ exclusive travel experiences, selected mix of lodging



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accommodations, private aviation alternatives, and overall exclusive services are in high demand today.”

Calderon, meanwhile, has found that travelers are diversifying in terms of the types of destinations they’d like to visit in Mexico, as he witnesses a surge in leisure bookings at hotels in Mexico’s larger me-

tropolises and historic colonial cities.

“We have more leisure travelers in the cities than we used to have before,” he said. “People who already know the beaches are now more willing to travel to destinations like Mexico City and experience the gastronomy, the art, the galleries, the museums. Also, the

colonial destinations have become very popular. San Miguel de Allende is still rising and Oaxaca is getting stronger, too. And there are people who want to spend more nights in Merida and combine it with Cancun.”

Still, Calderon is especially bullish about Mexico’s beach destinations. “I believe that 2022 could be, for the resort destinations, the year of the comeback,” he said. “It’s going to be above 2019 and 2018.” Already, he said that bookings at his company’s Cancun properties for June — including the Live Aqua Cancun, Fiesta Americana Condesa and Grand Fiesta Americana Coral Beach Cancun — were above those in the two years before the pandemic hit. And he said that wedding bookings are growing, in both beach and interior destinations.

DIVERSIFIED TARGET AUDIENCES

Mexico has always appealed to a diverse group of travelers, and destinations around the nation are aiming to strengthen and grow their arrivals by identifying and targeting specific niches.

Puerto Vallarta, for example, is aiming to attract younger travelers, to complement its long-standing appeal with a core audience that tourism officials describe as “older leisure travelers seeking all-inclusive experiences.” To foster a more balanced demographic, the tourism office is promoting new, more youthful events and activities. Millennial travelers are the target for the Lights All Night Festival, which is billed as Texas’ longest-running electronic music festival but will debut as an all-inclusive, four-day gathering in Puerto Vallarta in November, produced by event organizer Pollen and hosted by the Krystal Puerto Vallarta Hotel and Hilton Puerto Vallarta.

Puerto Vallarta’s hoteliers continue to develop new experiences to attract diverse visitors as well. Garza Blanca Preserve Resort & Spa Puerto Vallarta opened a new shopping and entertainment complex in June called TierraLuna, which hosts weekly organic farm-



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ers' markets and art exhibits, as well as yoga classes, meditation sessions and special events. Four restaurants are to open in the facility in November.

The LGBTQ segment continues to be an important niche for Puerto Vallarta, as well, with new offerings designed for the market. The Almar Resort Luxury LGBT Beach Front Experience, for example, has debuted a new, 50-room Mantamar Tower as well as new Eden Pool and Lounge Garden.

"Having a diverse appeal and offering authentic experiences to suit multiple interests differentiates Puerto Vallarta from other sun-and-sand destinations," says Puerto Vallarta Tourism's Villaseñor. "We have more than 15,000 rooms and offer specialized services for families, pet owners, luxury travelers, foodies, adventurers, art lovers, golfers, yogis and LGBTQ+ travelers. This diversity was crucial to the destination's recovery-leading efforts in 2020 and has ensured that it continues to enjoy the highest hotel occupancy of any of Mexico's beach destinations."

LGBTQ tourism is also increasingly in focus for the neighboring Riviera Nayarit, a region just north of Puerto Vallarta that's known for its luxury resort hotels, outdoor experiences and charming small beachfront towns. In June, the Riviera Nayarit Convention and Visitors Bureau hosted a gala event for travel advisors, tour operators and wedding planners in Mexico City to celebrate LGBTQ pride, as well as to promote the destination as an ideal choice for LGBTQ travel. The Riviera Nayarit also recently hosted an LGBTQ press trip in conjunction with St. Regis Hotels & Resorts, to highlight the destination's ability to cater to upscale LGBTQ travelers. "Slowly we're starting to do more promotion with the sales and promotion team — with travel agencies and inviting journalists," says Richard Zarkin, public rela-

tions manager at the Riviera Nayarit Convention and Visitors Bureau.

In addition, the Riviera Nayarit is solidifying its identity as a beach resort destination with the openings of several hotels this year, including Secrets Bahia Mita Surf & Spa Resort, Dreams Bahia Mita

Surf & Spa Resort and the Iberostar Grand, as well as 2022 openings like the Auberge Resorts Collection's Susurros del Corazon and the conversion of the Grand Matlali Hills Resort & Spa complex to an all-inclusive format under Marriott International's Delta brand. Still to come within the Marriott portfolio are properties flying the flags of Westin,



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Gastronomy is also an art to be celebrated. Hoteles Xcaret restaurants are managed by a Gastronomical Collective consisting of renowned national and international celebrity chefs. Hotel Xcaret Arte offers **nine premium dining experiences by celebrity chefs**, including a signature restaurant run by **Michelin Star chef Paco Méndez**. Beverages are also included in all bars.

"Hotel Xcaret Arte was born out of our love for Mexico and a vision of creating a place where it is an honor to be a part of Mexican art."

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Hotel Xcaret Arte is Grupo Xcaret's new hotel overlooking the Caribbean Sea, set only 45 minutes from Cancun's International Airport and 45 minutes from Tulum. The property features 900 Adults-Only suites and an All-Fun Inclusive concept that beats any all-inclusive hotel in the Riviera Maya.

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- **XPLOR**: zip lines and thrilling adventures within the jungle and caves.
- **XPLOR FUEGO**: extreme adventures under the starry night.
- **XENSES**: fantastic trips to awaken your senses.
- **XOXIMILCO**: a floating Mexican fiesta, full of music, flavors and colors.
- **XENOTES**: refreshing crystalline water and rock formations of exceptional beauty.

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Luxury travel continues to be a strong focus for Los Cabos as well, according to Esponda. “We are targeting a more affluent traveler that values safety over price,” he says. “This is especially true for Los Cabos’ luxury travel segment, which has led the destination’s

recovery since the second part of 2020. According to Los Cabos International Airport’s exit survey, which is submitted by travelers visiting the destination, visitors with a reported \$200,000-plus household income have increased by 35 percent in 2021, compared to figures reported in 2020, while those who earn \$500,000-plus have more than doubled.”

NEW ATTRACTIONS

Several destinations are banking on the allure of brand-new attractions to draw more visitors. Both Puerto Vallarta and the Riviera Nayarit, for example, are crowing about VidantaWorld, a new complex created by Mexican hospitality company Grupo Vidanta, that will have three theme parks. The first

phase, a jungle-themed park with “ancient” ruins, shops, dining and a lake that will serve as the setting for live entertainment, is to open in 2022 on the border between the states of Jalisco and Nayarit, and an aerial tram, the SkyDream Parks Gondola, has already debuted; it will shuttle passengers among the parks. Later phases include a water park and a “nature dream park.”

Further north along the Pacific coast, Mazatlan is also gearing up to unveil game-changing attractions. Parque Central, a 32.5-acre park complex set along a lagoon near the *malecon* waterfront boulevard, will be the setting for two large venues. The Sea of Cortes Aquarium, which is to open by the end of the year, will have nearly 40,000 square feet of exhibition areas, including jellyfish habitats and a 660,000-gallon oceanic tank with a tunnel and shark feeding area. Also under construction is the Mazatlan Museum, which has yet to announce an opening date. The facility will showcase the region’s heritage from prehistoric days to more recent times.

In addition to the promise of new attractions, the city of Mazatlan is also benefiting from increased air service, according to Julio Birrueta, director of the Mazatlan Tourism Board. In the month of May 2021, he says, Mazatlan had seven percent more airline seats than May 2019, and it was the first month that surpassed the amount of overall seats available compared to pre-pandemic months. “The Mexico market’s airline seats were 100 percent recovered in October 2020,” says Birrueta. “The total recovery — all markets, all segments — is expected to happen by November 2021.”

At destinations around Mexico, it appears, the only way is up. ■



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Muluk Spa

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