

## Beyond danger zones, the country abounds with wonders

cared of narco-terrorists? So are we. But that doesn't mean we've written off all of Mexico, where the

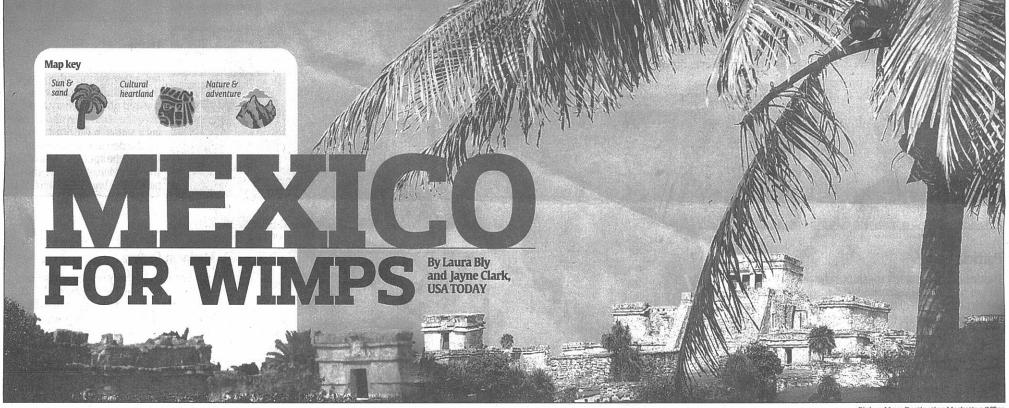
ramped-up war against and between violent drug cartels has spooked many would-be visitors.

Border areas notwithstanding, "most of the country has a pretty low crime rate," and tourists usually aren't targets, notes international security expert Bruce McIndoe of iJET Travel Intelligence. "Yes, there's room for collateral damage, but you can get struck by lightning, too.'

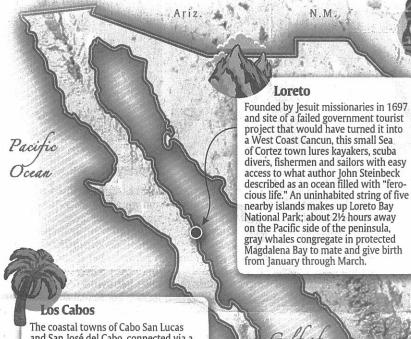
Even the U.S. State Department, whose recently expanded warning cautions against non-essential travel to parts or all of 14 (out of 31) Mexican states, exempts most of the country's marquee tourist spots — including these nine.



Monarch butterflies: See them by the millions in central Mexico in winter.



Ancient coastal grandeur: The Maya ruin of Tulum sits on the edge of the Caribbean Sea.



Loreto

Valle de Bravo

For decades, this scenic 17th-century

town of whitewashed buildings with red-tile rooftops has provided a weekend playground for the elite

of Mexico City, two hours away. But its fabulous setting on the shores of sparkling Lake Avandaro surrounded

by pine-forested mountains is attract-

ing outdoors enthusiasts for paraglid-

ing, wakeboarding, mountain biking and more. Pine groves east of town

are wintering grounds for millions of monarch butterflies that migrate

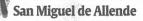
from Canada, providing a not-to-be-missed spectacle from November

and San José del Cabo, connected via a 20-mile expanse of glitzy resorts and gated all-inclusives known as The Corridor, cater to tourists of all stripes from tequila-swigging spring breakers (Arriving in June: global honchos bound for the G20 financial summit.) While desert sun and the turquoise Sea of Cortez may be the area's biggest draws, up-and-coming San José del Cabo offers free art gallery walks on Thursday eve-nings from November through June.

Riviera Nayarit

Stretching 100 miles along Mexico's Pacific coast from Nuevo Vallarta north to San Blas, this region packs a lot of stylistic variety. Prefer all-inclusive chain hotels? Try Nuevo Vallarta. If money's no object, slip inside the gated enclaves of Punta Mita. If you like water sports by day and watering holes by night, the town of Sayulita is your spot. If you're seeking peace and quiet in an artsy village, check into one of San Francisco's (aka San Pancho's) small hotels. Beach options range from secluded, rocky coves to palm-fringed expanses flanked by the Sierra

View more photos of Mexico's top locales at travel.usatoday.com.



Yes, there's a Starbucks. But despite its gringo trappings (and glut of gringo residents), San Miguel retains its essential Mexican colonial loveliness. From its luminescent neo-Gothic church to its shady patchwork of central plazas that are a gathering spot for locals and visitors alike, it's one of the country's most welcoming towns. Visit during "fiesta season"
— September through December — when the weather is temperate and there always seems to be a feast, procession or party going on along its cobbled streets

Mérida

This colonial city on the Yucatán Peninsula is the ideal spot from which to explore important Maya archaeological sites like Chichen Itza and Uxmal. The city has one of the largest historical centers in the Americas (next to Mexico City and Havana), and many of the Spanish colonial buildings from its wealthy past remain. (Look for carved Maya stones that were used in the construction of some.) Check into one of many small, elegant hotels downtown near the central square, or stay in the countryside at one of several fabulously restored haciendas.

Cancun/Riviera Maya

Cancun's manicured beaches, cheap margaritas and plethora of U.S. chain restaurants have helped make it the country's top destination for party-hearty types. But the Caribbean state of Quintana Roo, which runs south to the Belize border, is gearing up for a different celebration. Though some doomsday theorists equate the end of the "Long Count" Maya calendar on Dec. 21, 2012, with the end of civilization, local tourism promoters beg to differ — and are touting everything from archaeological lectures to a "Mayan Galactic Alignment" cruise

Mexico City

You could spend days just hanging around the central plaza — one of Mexico's most enchanting. Surrounding restaurants serve spicy, complex molés, among other regional specialties. And the people-watching is superb. But tear yourself away to explore nearby crafts villages whose residents, descendants of Zapotec Indians and other indigenous groups, weave rugs, carve wooden animals, create pottery and more. Also nearby: major archaeological sites such as Monte Albán.

San Cristóbal de las Casas

Though it's not easy to reach - the closest airport in Tuxtla Gutiérrez is more than an hour's mountainous drive away - this Spanish colonial outpost and former center of a failed Zapatista uprising in 1994 is well worth the journey. The one-time backpacker and bohemian hangout is now home to upscale boutique hotels and restaurants, and serves as a convenient launchpad for rafting and hiking trips and explorations of traditional Maya-speaking villages. The haunting Maya ruins of Palenque are about a five-hour drive to the northeast.

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