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Mexico Travel: tourism officials want more Canadian visitors

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Canada sent nearly 1.6 million visitors to Mexico last year. But that's not nearly enough to satisfy the country's tourism folks.

Rodolfo Lopez-Negrete, COO of the Mexico Tourism Board, told me in a recent telephone conversation that in the month of May, there was a 1.5 per cent increase in the number of Canadians.

"Canada is our second largest market, but I'm not happy with the level of growth," Lopez-Negrete said. "We should be up anywhere from five to six per cent given the strength of the Canadian economy and given that Canada has now surpassed the U.S. as a richer country based on an individual basis. Canadians travel all over the world and I think we should be able to increase the numbers.

"We're not unhappy with our Canadian numbers," he said. We've done a great job. Thirty five years ago we had just 650,000 Canadian visitors and now it's 1.6 million and growing. But it should be more."



Tourists walk the beach in Cancun. Cancun and the Riviera Maya are considered some of the safest parts of Mexico.

TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

That means building stronger connections in the Canadian marketplace, Lopez-Negrete told me. "We've been able to expand service in an aggressive manner with WestJet, Transat, Air Canada, Sunwing, and others. We need to continue in that direction and definitely inject more money and speak to consumers through the media more."

Lopez-Negrete said a key job, of course, is to speak with the media about violence in Mexico; a continuing concern for some travelers.

"We have to keep setting the record straight about the perception of Mexico versus the reality of it being safe."

There have been incidents, but Lopez-Negrete said they're concentrated in areas most tourists don't go.

"Take a destination like our southern states of Yucatan, Quintana Roo and Campeche. The average figure for people killed is five for every 100,000. Miami is something like 16 or 17. That doesn't mean people shouldn't go to Miami. That's my home base and I live there.

"The violence we've had in certain specific pockets of Mexico gets taken out of context," he said. "Go to Los Cabos. The crime rate is three (deaths) per 100,000 people; even lower than the southern states. If we have problems near the U.S. border, it doesn't mean our major resort centres aren't safe."

Lopez-Negrete said his wife is from Toronto and he knows the city well.

"It broke my heart" to see the shooting at the Eaton Centre, he said. "But that doesn't mean tourists shouldn't go shopping in the mall" in downtown Toronto.

Asked if he expects deal this fall and winter, Lopez-Negrete said it's a perfect time to visit.

"The Canadian dollar is strong and the quality of our hotels and services is comparable to the best in the world. And Mexico is going through a very stable situation. The world is in turmoil but Mexico is like Canada; with a very stable economy. And our foreign investment is at a peak. The whole climate in Mexico is definitely conducive for people to come as a tourist or as an investor. Not many countries in the world can preach that."

WEST JET UPS THE ANTE

Fascinating to see WestJet - which used to pride itself on treating all customers the same - bringing in premium economy.

As [the Star's Vanessa Lu reported](#) today, WestJet "will set aside four rows of this type of seating, which offers more legroom with a 36-inch seat pitch, and new features such as priority boarding and other in-flight amenities.

It's aimed at business types and leisure travelers with a little extra cash in their jeans.

Since they haven't found a way to physically stretch their planes, the extra space for some folks will mean slightly diminished space for folks in regular economy.

Details on pricing are to come later, but it sounds like the premium seats will be roughly midway between the cost of a regular flight and a business class flight on Air Canada.

Modifications to WestJet's fleet of Boeing 737s will begin this month, with all planes reconfigured by the end of this year. All economy seats will be standardized with a seat pitch of 31 inches to 32 inches, Lu reported.

WestJet clearly is taking aim at Air Canada in a number of ways; adding something like business class light and adding flights from Toronto to LaGuardia in New York and bringing in a frequent flyer program. It'll be interesting to see how it all works out...