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March 11, 2011

Adrian Brijbassi

Rodolfo Lopez Negrete, COO of the [Mexico Tourism Board](#), was in Toronto last month as his nation aims to build on a record year of travel. Nearly 1.5 million Canadians visited Mexico last year, an increase of 19 per cent from 2009 and 28 per cent from 2008. Here is some of Negrete's conversation with Star Travel during which he touched on a number of issues, including the violence in Mexico, what he likes about Canada and why you shouldn't believe any reports of the demise of Mexican tourism:

Q: What are the goals for the tourism board in trying to attract more Canadians?

A: Over the last year, we have increased our investment in the Canadian market in a substantial manner. For the first time in many, many years, we released a powerful and substantial advertising and promotional campaign in Canada last year, and we worked on partnerships we have with major tour operators and airlines that we do in business with in Canada.

The level of investment combined was in the millions of dollars and we're happy to see that it's paying back.

If you go back to 2005, the number of Canadian tourists who visited Mexico was about 600,000, so we have more than doubled the business over the last six years . . . We believe we can grow Canadian business by 15 per cent against 2010. That's not as robust as in 2009 and in 2008, but it's also a healthy increase.

Q: To what do you attribute the increase in travel?

A: We believe it's a combination of several factors. One, alongside with this robust advertising and marketing investment that we have exercised, is the keen interest from airlines in Canada to improve and enhance connectivity to Mexico. In other words, we jointly were stimulating demand.

All these carriers have opened up markets with us from all over Canada. I remember vividly years ago that the two major hubs were Toronto and Montreal. Now you're talking about nine, 10, 12 different markets throughout Canada.

That's one key component. The other key component is that we have improved the tourist infrastructure in Mexico in a dramatic way over the last 10 years. In Mexico we have 14 AAA five-diamond award properties. Hawaii and the Caribbean combined have less than half of that.

Q: What relationship do Canadian travellers have with Mexicans, do you think?

A: Canadians are explorers. They understand geography very well, as opposed to other countries that don't understand geography as well, so Canadians appreciate, I think, what we offer in Mexico. To us this relationship is critical.

Canadians understand that we have a country that is much more than sun and beach. There are many other destinations that are also beautiful in their sun and beach offerings, but we have much more. And it might sound a little bit cliché but it's something that shows up all the time in surveys that we conduct and that is that Mexicans are hospitable by nature. That's something you have in your blood or you don't have in your blood.

Last year we conducted a survey of 26,000 tourists, particularly from U.S and Canada, and two facts came out of that survey. One, 97 per cent of those interviewed said they would come back. That's extraordinarily high. And also 92 per cent of those surveyed said customer satisfaction was excellent.

Q: You've doubled Canadian tourism in five years, can you double it again in another five?



Rodolfo Lopez Negrete, the COO of the Mexico Tourism Board, believes his nation can be No. 5 in the world in tourism by 2018.

Adrian Brijbassi/Toronto Star

A: I think we can. The good news, is the ceiling is still very high. Canadians travel a lot. They always did. Now their economy is strong so they're travelling even more.

Q: Some other tourism boards will say they see an opportunity because of the bad news coming out of Mexico. They feel they can offer an alternative to Mexico for travellers. What would you say to people with that outlook?

A: Well, I wish them luck. We welcome competition. We have tremendous respect for all the destinations as well. What we try to do is focus on our strengths. Mexico received 22.6 million tourists last year. That's a big, big number. This includes land visits from the U.S. that spanned at least one night. Out of those total number of visitors, nearly 10 million came by air, which is more representative in the Canadian spectrum.

We have been able to go back to the levels and slightly better than of '08. We feel we are on the right track. What we have not been able to do is go back to the level of spend, because the average rates — of the hotels, primarily — haven't been able to go back to the levels of '08. So we're doing very well in volume and we're trying to do better in spend.

Now, having said that, we recognize the situation of spend is a global thing. I was just in Vegas and the room rates were \$79. We see this as a global situation. Slowly but surely everybody is going to start picking up, I believe.

The array of strengths that we have, the features, are very difficult to compete against.

What the traveller is looking for is the most exciting vacation possible. Everybody is stressed, everybody is worried about debt, so when you make a trip you're going to make it worthwhile. So the experience is what we're focused on.

Q: What would you say to Canadians reluctant to travel to Mexico because of some of the negative news reports?

A: What I would say to them is we received 1.5 million Canadians last year, and the number of incidents that we experienced are really, really minimal. Most of the incidents are accident-driven, like unfortunately the one that occurred with the couple (Calgarians Dale and Linda McDougall) swimming in the Pacific in Los Cabos and they drowned. There are other incidents that were not accidents, as we know, what I would say is that the way the incidents were handled is important . . . all of them were handled in a compassionate way and with a high level of professionalism.

I'm not going to say it doesn't worry us. Of course it worries us very much, but how you look after those incidents I believe is very crucial. The situation of violence in Mexico is gang-related it's gang against gang. It's not aimed to the Mexican population nor to tourism. It's concentrated in specific pockets in Mexico. If a potential tourist were to ask me if they should go to see Juarez, I would say definitely not. Should I go to Reynosa in Tamaulipas? I would say definitely not. There are specific places, most of them in the northeastern part of the country, where I would say definitely you don't want to go there. But as far as the tourist destinations in Mexico, from the west to the east, they are totally safe.

To tourists in Canada, I would say that Mexico is safe, it's safer than ever.

Q: Internally, do tourism boards talk about improving safety?

A: This initiative is headed by President Calderon and it is one that you don't resolve overnight, but it's the right thing to do to once and for all eradicate that situation. It's a challenge at state and local levels. . . .

We in the Mexican Tourism Board — even though we are not involved in security issues — clearly to us it's important that we have those initiatives take place so that we give more certainty to our potential customers.

Q: So Mexican tourism is healthy?

A: The numbers speak for themselves: We are No. 10 in the world in tourism. We want to grow our business and be among the top five in the world by 2018. That's a very bold, very ambitious goal. That is why we are so focused on markets that are critical for us to achieve those goals. Canada is clearly one of those.

Q: What do you like about Toronto when you come here?

A: My wife is from here and I've been married 20 years, so I'm very familiar with it. I'm a big admirer of your diversity. I always said that Canadians in general and people in Toronto in particular are very nice people. We in Mexico are treated very well here all the time.