

There is a little bit of Mexico in all of our hearts. It goes beyond the teal blue waters, powder beaches, boutique taquerias and luxurious hotels with camellia-scented breezes.

It's the quintessential culture of Mexico that pulls at us. The generous spirit of the people and the rich Mayan, Aztec and Spanish history quickly establishes a laid back ambience conducive to both leisurely conversation and business networking.

"When meeting planners think of Mexico, they're looking for context and content—culture—versus just hotel space, especially with associations who are always looking to attract more attendees," says Eduardo Chaillo, CMP/CMM, executive director of the **Mexico Tourism Board**. "Mexico has always been a link to more stable, sustainable relationships that groups can build with each other and the people of Mexico."

Right now, Mexico is arguably the best value on the planet. For example, **Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach Cancun Resort & Spa** has earned a AAA 5-Diamond award for 15 years running. It would cost more than double the room rate in the U.S., and triple if you book the all-inclusive add-on package.

In this political and economic climate, Fiesta Americana Resorts is doing something pretty smart. They operate properties

throughout Latin America, but they've taken five resorts in various price ranges to create the Grand Meetings Mexico collection, highlighting the product, the value and the destinations.

At the top end, there's the Grand Coral Beach Cancun, **Live Aqua Cancun** and **Fiesta Americana Grand Los Cabos Golf & Spa**. The two mid-range resorts are **Fiesta Americana Condesa Cancun** and **Fiesta Americana Puerto Vallarta**.

"They're exotic but not foreign," says David Manzella, vp of group sales. And he dismisses the issue of safety in Mexico, suggesting it shouldn't even be part of the discussion. "If you compare statistics at those destinations with any major city in the world, it's not even close."

Overall, Mexico is actually ascending on the world stage. ICCA (Int'l Congress & Convention Association) ranked Mexico #22 globally in 2010, up from #27 in 2009. And Los Cabos was just chosen as the host locale for the G20 Summit in 2012.

CANCUN/RIVIERA MAYA

The **Riviera Maya** has been hard at work building up its arts and cultural attractions, and oh what fun they're having. Besides the much-touted sun/sea/sand combo, the area is home to funky Playa



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del Carmen and its famous Quinta Avenida, where the latest fashion is holding court in chic little mezcal bars like **Rufino** (we highly recommend starting with the coconut or passionfruit variety).

They also have a laundry list of attractions combining Mother Nature and man-made fun. One of the most popular, **Xcaret**, recently added two new routes to their *Experiencias Xcaret* tours, with visits to the ancient Mayan cities of Cobá and Ek Balam. Those looking for adventure can strap on headlamps and explore the Sac Actun cave system. And for gala dinners, Xcaret offers a wide variety of well-produced cultural entertainment options.

The destination is also keen on festivals showcasing everything from turtles to music and dancing to fine foods. In November, they celebrate the 3-day **Annual Riviera Maya Jazz Festival**, now one of the top 10 international music festivals. And in March, the region will host the **1st Annual Cancun-Riviera Maya Wine & Food Festival**, with celebrity chefs participating from around the world. Special guest of honor will be none other than Ferran Adrià, principal exponent of molecular cuisine and owner of the legendary (and sadly now closed) El Bulli in Spain.

With so much going on, the **Riviera Maya Tourism Board** recently opened a designated meetings office, headed by Carlos Mora, meetings tourism manager.

"This is something that Riviera Maya has been planning for a long time," said Mora. "Now we can do it since our meeting space

has been growing every year. We now have over 600,000 square feet with a capacity for more than 40,000 people. And there's over 50 hotels with meeting space designed to accommodate large groups, incentive tours and pre and post-convention activities."

MEXICO ART CAPITALS

Magnificent, confounding and 100% exciting, **Mexico City** offers a wildly eclectic array of venues from the **World Trade Center Mexico City** to a list of museums second only in number to Paris.

Telecom tycoon Carlos Slim, ranked the wealthiest individual in the world in 2011, is adding to the list with his new **Soumaya Museum**, one of his biggest gifts to the art world. Named after his late wife, Soumaya is a modernist architectural masterpiece displaying Slim's vast private collection. Alongside the pre-Columbian and colonial exhibits, Soumaya houses works by Mexican masters such as Rufino Tamayo and Diego Rivera; some of Mr. Slim's Picassos, Dalis, Da Vincis; and the second largest collection of Rodin sculptures outside the Louvre.

Mexico's second largest city, **Guadalajara** will soon welcome the \$35 million **Museum of Modern & Contemporary Art Guadalajara**, due to open in 2013. Designed by the Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron, this uber contemporary structure boasts among its curatorial advisors Patrick Charpenel, curator of Art Basel Miami Beach, who lives in Guadalajara.

The city is Mexico's fastest growing metropolis with new hotels like **The Westin Guadalajara**, located across the street from the enormous Expo Guadalajara and close to the World Trade Center and Plaza del Sol shopping mall. The 221-room hotel features a sleek urban design and 2,000 sf of meeting space.

PACIFIC COAST

A longtime leader in the culinary sector, **Puerto Vallarta** is home to such delectable resorts as the **Garza Blanca Preserve, Resort & Spa**, where monthly dinner events pair chef Francisco Tadeo Ruano's dishes with in-house sommelier Elsa González Pieuchot's picks from Ensenada's excellent Monte Xanic winery. Intimate 25-person groups are served personally by Pieuchot, accompanied by Monte Xanic's producer.

"Our events feature exotic selections from Mexico's flourishing wine country of Guadalupe Valley, including premium bottles from our legendary Blanca Blue wine cellar, which boasts more than 260 labels from around the world," says Pieuchot. "The chef and I design every single dish to perfectly complement each wine—a piece of art for a piece of art. Everything is unique and the rest is pure magic."

