



Double-Standards used to Sensationalize U.S. News Coverage of Baja California, Mexico

By Ron Raposa

In early April two San Diego TV stations reported that a local student was late in returning from spring break in Rosarito Beach, Baja California, Mexico. The stories strongly suggested he might have been the victim of foul play. One showed footage of a police action in Tijuana.

There were a few problems with the coverage.

First, the 21-year-old student had been in Rosarito only five days – a very common spring break stay – and classmates had seen him in Rosarito the same day the stories broadcast. He returned home the next day.

Secondly, if the situation had occurred anywhere except Baja California, it likely would not have been broadcast. Media outlets that time of year could fill their entire reports with coverage of spring breakers who come home late.

The young man's parents, who went to the media, weren't to blame for the premature and damaging broadcasts. It is natural for parents to worry and express concerns. The blame falls on media that use far different standards when it relates to Baja California coverage.

This use of double standards did not begin or end with the “missing student” story, nor is it unprecedented. But the most vivid examples began appearing last year and have developed into an ongoing trend.

Several months ago, many U.S. media outlets carried stories about a handful of crimes that targeted Baja California visitors in 2007 over several months and across several hundred miles of the large peninsula.

Each story repeated the same handful of incidents. Some were distributed by a wire service worldwide. They spawned a series of subsequent stories, each using the same few incidents. The repetition made five incidents seem like 5,000.

This is not to say that the crimes were not serious; they were. They needed to be reported and addressed. To be a victim of a crime is an ordeal. To be a victim in a foreign country is even more traumatic.

The problem was that stories lacked perspective and created the false impression that crime against visitors is rampant in Baja California. If the same focus had been used in covering San Diego, people would have become very frightened to visit that city.

The Baja California State Secretary of Tourism has received no report of a violent crime against even one of the millions of tourists here this entire year, a record that perhaps Southern California cannot match.

Yet stories in U.S. media, most recently the San Diego Reader, continue to suggest that it is not safe to visit Baja California. Lacking any new incidents to report, the stories continue to rehash the several ones from 2007.

During the same period as the Baja California incidents, an Australian tourist was beaten and thrown in a fire in Ocean Beach, crime rose dramatically on the San Diego Trolley system, and an off-duty policeman was accused of shooting a woman and her young son following an apparent traffic dispute in North County.

There were many other serious incidents – but none prompted any media outlet to do a story asking whether it is safe for tourists to visit San Diego. It is not likely that they will; much different standards are used.

For months, very little about Baja California except sensationalized crime stories have been published or broadcast in the United States. It has led to a very unbalanced perception of this area. Some of the reports are simply inaccurate and irresponsible journalism.

Yes, Baja California has brought some of the problems on itself. Police extortion of motorists in some areas went uncorrected for far too long and is still being dealt with. Corrupt and corrupting criminal cartels wielded pervasive influence along the drug routes leading into the United States.

But now Mexican federal, state and city governments have joined together in a serious effort to end that. This has led to shootouts, such as the April one in Tijuana that left 14 cartel members dead. However that incident was not connected to visitor safety any more than a major police action would be in the U.S.

The same is true of the discovery of four bodies in Rosarito several weeks ago. Some initial media reports, including in Mexican papers, claimed that four Americans had been executed in Mexico. It turned out that three were Mexican nationals, and the woman who was from the United States had an extensive

criminal record, including in Mexico. Some U.S. media outlets still report that all were Americans.

Involvements in drugs or ties to other criminal activities are suspected in these sad shooting deaths. They had nothing to do with danger to tourists or the typical resident, no more than the death of a Mexican national involved in criminal activities in the U.S. would.

All that said, Baja California needs to do more to ensure visitor safety and sense of well-being – and it is.

In Rosarito, reformist Mayor Hugo Torres has created a special Tourist Police force to protect the well-being of more than one million visitors a year. More than 300 city residents have formed a citizen's watch program for tourist areas.

Rosarito Beach has established an ombudsman office, where visitors can receive help 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This includes the reporting of crimes, which had been a difficult process. It is part of showing that Rosarito cares about its visitors.

Baja California State Tourism has established a 078 number for visitor assistance, among other significant steps.

Federal patrols on highways have been increased. No serious crimes against Baja California visitors have been reported in months, including during busy spring break and Memorial Day weekends.

Does all this guarantee that a crime against a visitor or U.S. citizen will never occur in Rosarito or Baja California? Of course not.

No place south of heaven can guarantee that, especially one that has more than 10 million visitors each year and scores of thousands of expatriate residents.

About 14,000 expatriates, most of them U.S.-born, live in Rosarito – which years ago established Mexico's first Foreign Residents Assistance Office. Some of them are among the most upset about the recent coverage of Baja California and Rosarito, the place they call home.

I am a U.S. citizen who lived there most of my life, working primarily as a journalist. I also have been visiting Baja California frequently for 30 years, and have lived in Rosarito Beach full-time for three. I have never been the victim of a crime or police extortion here.

I know many other expatriates here who have had the same experience; others who have not been as fortunate. The ratio I believe is similar to what you'd find in the United States.

Most expatriates in Rosarito would welcome the chance to talk about their experiences living here. I don't think any would ask that crimes against expatriates or visitors be covered up – after all it is their friends and family who are affected.

Some U.S. reporters who write about Baja California seldom if ever visit here. The San Diego Union-Tribune, which usually has balanced stories on this area, has a reporter who comes here frequently to cover stories and lived in Tijuana for several years.

The media surely has the right – and the responsibility – to cover tourist safety issues. But it also has the obligation to do it fairly, and to use the same standards on both sides of the border.

To U.S. media I would simply ask: report Baja California as you would Southern California, with perspective and some persona and in-depth knowledge. That's what most people in the United States or Mexico want and deserve.

Ron Raposa, the international public relations representative for Rosarito Beach, also worked for 20 years as a journalist, most of that time in the United States. This commentary first appeared in the August 16 edition of the biweekly Baja Times English language newspaper.

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