

Mexico Travel Advisory: What the New System Means for U.S. Travelers

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A new tiered travel advisory system from the U.S. State Department [was rolled out yesterday](#), replacing the old one of alerts, warnings, and security message. The four-level threat system is intended to make security information for potential American travelers clearer and more nuanced, but it has also led to a fair share of confusion. Most notably, people seem especially concerned with designations given to [Mexico](#): The country as a whole is at a level two advisory, meaning "exercise increased caution," but [five states](#) *within* the country are at level four, the highest on the scale, with the recommendation being "do not travel."

The *Los Angeles Times* [makes the point](#) that the level four designation puts these five states—the Pacific regions of Colima, Guerrero, Michoacán, and Sinaloa; and Tamaulipas, on the Gulf of Mexico—at the "same danger category as war-torn Somalia, Afghanistan, and Syria." True, but is this new? Not really. American tourists have previously been warned against traveling to certain regions, considered unsafe due to the prevalence of crime—it's really just the nomenclature that has changed. As recently as January 1, before the changeover to the new system, some Mexican states (including the aforementioned ones) were under a "travel warning," advising American citizens to defer travel, the same designation given to those "war-torn" regions mentioned above.

In Sinaloa, for example, the [now-archived](#) travel warning page cautioned, "One of

Mexico's most powerful criminal organizations is based in the state of Sinaloa, and violent crime rates remain high in many parts of the state. Defer non-essential travel to the state of Sinaloa, except the cities of Mazatlan, Los Mochis, and the Port of Topolobampo." Meanwhile, other regions, including the popular tourist destination of Yucatán, had "no travel advisory in effect." (Today, under the new system, Yucatán is given a level two, the same as the country as a whole.)

As Bureau of Consular Affairs Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Overseas Citizen Services Michelle Bernier-Toth outlined in a briefing on Wednesday, the new system is also a direct reflection on the rules put into place for U.S. embassy personnel and the resulting lack of resources available to Americans.

When asked about the state-by-state breakdown of Mexico's travel advisory page, Bernier-Toth said: "The differentiation between states that you see from Mexico relates to the restrictions that our mission in Mexico imposes upon U.S. Government personnel in the country: where they can go, where they're not allowed to go, where they can go with very specific security precautions. We wanted to make sure that the U.S. traveling public was aware of all those restrictions and rules that we impose upon ourself in Mexico. And the Mexico Travel Warning, the previous Travel Warning, had that information. I think it's much more clearly spelled out here in the new Travel Advisory." The restrictions placed on U.S. government personnel all over the world inform the recommendations made for travelers, not just because of how they are response to specific threats, but also because, in areas where there are no government personnel, there's also no one to come to travelers' aid in the case of emergencies.

Following the unveiling of the new travel advisory system, the Mexico Tourism Board released a statement, assuring tourists that much of the country remains safe: "Mexico's major international tourist destinations have been explicitly listed as having no travel restrictions, or they exist in states where there are no special travel advisories for tourists," the statement reads, before noting where the tourism board sees room for improvement in the travel advisory system. "Our main concern comes from the fact that the crime, violence, and other statistics used are those for a country overall, not related to the number of incidents that impact foreign visitors. Additionally, the U.S. Department of State continues to not issue a travel advisory for the U.S. applying the same criteria and system, which would inform and assist both foreigners and domestic travelers who intend to travel within the U.S."

Mexico isn't the only country with region-specific advisory levels that differ from the country as a whole. Conflict, crime, or even the effects of a natural disaster or public health emergency can often be confined to parts of a country that make them off-limits, while other sections of it remain safe. [Georgia](#), for example, a country that we urge [you to visit this year](#), has a [level one travel advisory](#), meaning "exercise normal precautions." But, the State Department puts a level four "do not travel" on the Russian-occupied regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia "due to civil unrest, crime, and landmines." [Colombia](#) carries a [level two warning](#), but the detailed travel advisory identifies thirteen regions, including Putumayo on the border of Peru and

Ecuador, with a level three advisory, for which the State Department recommends tourists "reconsider travel" due to the threat of violent crime.

In 2017, Mexico suffered [one of its most violent years](#) in two decades, but any concerns about safety require a layer of nuance—something that the new travel advisory system affords with its state-by-state breakdown. So no, you shouldn't visit states like Sinaloa and Tamaulipas, which have been so gravely affected by the drug trade and organized crime. But should you cancel your beach retreat to [Tulum](#) or [food crawl through Mexico City](#)? The State Department says to "exercise increased caution," the same as you should [following the level two advisory in places](#) like Rome, Paris, Bali, and the Maldives.