

Cancun rethinks its role as a mecca for spring break

by Lee Romney
Los Angeles Times
March 20, 2001

CANCUN, Mexico - It's a Tuesday night and time for the "Booze Cruise," an all-you-can-drink extravaganza billed as "the wildest party in the Caribbean. ... If you can remember, it's sure to be a night you will not soon forget!!!"

After wet T-shirt and "hot body" contests at the island destination, organizers call out for a pair of men's underpants. Jeremy Ross, 21, complies, stripping naked. This is the first spring break visit here for the student from Johnson & Wales University in Rhode Island, and it's all about the party.

"It was hot," said Ross, who was lured to Cancun by MTV's coverage of the sex-and-sand vacation packages.

With a drinking age of 18 and plenty of free booze promotions, Cancun bills itself as an alcohol lover's paradise. The promotions have paid off: Cancun, where the worst of Mexican and U.S. cultures arguably collide, ranks as the No. 1 destination for U.S. students on spring break, surpassing Jamaica and once-popular Florida spots, according to leading student travel brokers.

Talk to officials here, however, and you might think that Cancun was the capital of the mixed message. Responding largely to excesses of years past, the Office of Tourism has stepped up a campaign to plaster hotel rooms, discos and bars with English-language posters and placards asking that students "Be Cool While in Cancun."

Students are asked to sign a code of conduct when they land at the airport. "I received the warning note from the local authorities," it says. "Now I know the rules." Those include: No public sex or nudity. No drinking or urinating in the street. No



A waiter pours tequila down the throat of a patron at Senor Frog's, a popular nightclub in Cancun, Mexico. The drinking age in Mexico is 18.

LOS ANGELES TIMES PHOTO BY LEE ROMNEY

free rides on public transport. And no rudeness or disruptions of public order.

The campaign is not new. But city officials - increasingly stung by the mixed reputation that the seasonal bash bestows on Cancun - have vowed to enforce rules more aggressively this year. Reports of crime targeting U.S. students on spring break also are on the rise as Cancun's population swells to serve the booming tourist industry. The incidents have prompted warnings from the U.S. State Department, which also advises students to obey Mexican laws of decency.

The result for Cancun: a delicate effort to castigate wild behavior while welcoming the dollars that students bring.

"They come to have fun and they are welcome here, but they have to maintain a certain conduct," said

Manuel Escalante Sosa, director of special projects for the local Office of Tourism, who is heading efforts to tone down the celebration. "We don't want to tarnish the image of Cancun."

Rachel Sater, a marketing coordinator for Los Angeles-based STA Travel, which bills itself as the world's largest student travel agency, puts it more bluntly.

"I feel sorry for the Mexican government," she said. "I'm sure they don't want people throwing up in the streets and taking their clothes off, but they want the revenue."

The dance of excess, offense and capitalism plays out each year in this Caribbean theme park at the northeastern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula. As many as 100,000 college students descend on Cancun each year in a six-week bacchanal that begins in late February and peaks in mid-March.

Baltimore-based Student Travel

Services, the main supplier of spring break packages to STA Travel and smaller agencies, sent 9,000 students last weekend alone.

An elongated strip of 142 hotels, Cancun exists purely on tourist dollars. Some industry sectors, such as bars and discotheques, earn as much as 70 percent of their annual revenue from the travelers dubbed "los spring breakers," said Julian Balbuena, general manager of Best Day Tours, which organizes the Booze Cruise and tamer tourist events.

The students fill about 15 percent of Cancun's more than 25,000 hotel rooms weekly during the season, pushing overall occupancy to 90 percent, Escalante said. That means fully 75 percent are filled with older tourists, in some of the most elegant hotels in the Americas. But the college crowd is most noticeable.

Some hotels - including the Melia

Cancun and Cancun Palace - are rejecting the spring breakers outright this year because of the damage they cause. Most others require a \$100-a-person damage deposit.

For Cancun residents, reactions range from bemusement to disgust.

"I've never been to the U.S., but I hear it's nothing like it is here," said Alejandra Rojas, a 29-year-old waitress at Tequila Boom, a spring break dance spot. "People have sex under the tables and in the phone booths."

For Rojas, the job pays well, and night work allows her to spend more time with her 8-year-old daughter. But she said not all the locals can stomach the raunchy contests and behavior.

"They come here and feel like kings of the world," she said of the students. "Some times they create disasters and break things."

The disrespect is mutual.

Some spring breakers complain of being overcharged and mistreated. "They won't serve you your free drinks unless you tip them, and they're so mean," said Marla Beck, 19, a Johnson & Wales student who said she unwittingly paid the equivalent of \$50 for a drink and wasn't offered change.

Even Mexicans concede that the U.S. students are sometimes gouged. "In reality, they're robbed," said Primitivo Garcia Balderas, a waiter at a relatively upscale restaurant that does not attract too many spring break revelers.

Some spring breakers allege far worse: "They stole my clothes. They drugged me. They called me a whore, and then they kicked me out of the hotel," said a 19-year-old American student who believes that her drink was spiked and that she was then sexually assaulted at her hotel pool by a local.

She did not call police out of fear,

she said, nor did she notify the U.S. consular representative in Cancun. Instead, she racked up \$1,000 in long-distance calls to her mom, who helped place her in a different hotel.

The consular office in Cancun referred calls about spring break troubles to the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City. A spokesman there would not provide data on complaints or crime reports but noted that the State Department Fact Sheet on spring break in Cancun, released Feb. 22, refers to "increasing reports of crime."

It advises travelers that such crimes as rape "sometimes involve alcohol and the discotheque environment" and that belongings should not be left on the beach unattended.

During the first half of the 1990s, before Cancun made its name as an upscale destination for honeymooners and older couples, March and April were painfully slow months. Spring break filled that gap. Now, some hotel operators and civic boosters are questioning whether it's worth it.

"Everyone's getting very hard on spring break," said the manager at nightclub Fat Tuesday's, who declined to give his name. "Out of 90,000 people we get, we might have 40 problems. That's very good."

Still, city officials are tightening restrictions. Meetings with law enforcement and transportation officials, as well as members of the hotel, bar and discotheque associations, began last September in preparation for this season, Escalante said. Volunteer Mexican students are staffing the airport on weekends to hand out and explain the code of conduct.

And tour brokers have been asked to send a particularly clear message to students to clean up their act.

Cancun officials and tour operators say problems are far from representative. The vast majority of tourists are older than 18, they add, and legally responsible for their behavior.

University of Wisconsin student group protests Starbucks

by Deborah Kades
Knight-Ridder Newspapers
March 21, 2001

Carrying signs urging consumers to "Think globally, buy locally," members of the UW-Madison Greens, a student activist group, staged modest protests in front of the two downtown Starbucks Coffee locations Tuesday.

At the same time, Starbucks Corp. announced at its annual shareholders meeting in Seattle that it will split its shares 2-for-1, effective March 30. Companies may split their shares to keep prices accessible to individual investors, such as the Starbucks employees who participate in the company's stock-purchase plan. Starbucks closed at \$43.25, down \$1.06 for the day.

About 40 protesters and onlookers gathered in front of the Starbucks at 661 State Street at 2:30 p.m., urging consumers to boycott the international gourmet coffee chain and patronize locally owned coffee shops.

Organic, "free-trade" coffee was provided at no charge by Cafe Assisi, 245 W. Gilman St., said Brian Honermann, an Assisi collective worker/owner and a junior at UW-Madison, who participated in the protest.

Fewer than a dozen people showed up for an 8 a.m. protest at the Capitol Square Starbucks, 1 E. Main St.

Protesters accuse Starbucks of failing to promote its own line of "fair trade" coffee aggressively enough. Fair trade practices attempt to ensure that producers in the Third World receive fair wages.

The Madison Greens also charge that Starbucks does not guarantee that its dairy products are free of rBGH, a synthetic dairy hormone that increases milk production. In a detailed letter posted on Starbucks' Web site, Orin C. Smith, president and chief executive officer, replied that the company expects to offer rBGH-free milk in all its U.S. stores by the end of the year.

Starbucks sold two cups of fair trade coffee to protesters at the State St. location, however it was not one of the coffees featured for the day.

Starbucks also has Madison stores at 2825 University Ave. and in Barnes & Noble Booksellers, 7433 Mineral Point Road.

For more information, see www.fairtradefederation.com and www.starbucks.com

New York law students give peace award to former President Clinton

by Michael Saul
and Dave Goldiner
Knight-Ridder Newspapers
March 21, 2001

NEW YORK -- Bill Clinton's license to practice law has been suspended, but that hasn't stop students at Manhattan's Benjamin Cardozo School of Law from honoring him.

"He is an advocate for peace," said Matthew Seidner, a member of one of the two student groups that gave Clinton the International Advocate for Peace Award.

Clinton spoke about his efforts to bring peace to the Mideast and Ireland at the award ceremony Monday, which was not endorsed by the school's administration.

A handful of protesters held signs ridiculing the former President for

the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Clinton agreed to give up practicing law for five years to avoid prosecution for lying about the Lewinsky affair while under oath.

"It's wrong to be giving any award from a law school to someone who can't practice law," said law student David Ben-Haim, 23. "Clinton is someone who has no ethics."

"Clinton is doing anything he can to get any award he can," added Peretz Berk, 35.

Since leaving office, Clinton has been at the center of two new scandals -- outrage over his pardon of a fugitive financier whose ex-wife has donated heavily to Clinton's presidential library and the Democratic Party and criticism over a now-scuttled plan to rent pricey offices next to Carnegie Hall.

Even as his approval ratings have plunged, he has made the rounds of corporations and academic audiences in search of friendly turf.

Presidential historian Henry

Graff said Clinton knows the public will eventually turn back to him.

"You do know he will bounce back," said Graff, a professor at Columbia University. "He is the Comeback Kid."

Clinton has made several \$100,000 lectures and headed to Europe last week for a whirlwind speaking tour of three countries that netted about \$600,000.

Navy football player accused of second rape in Baltimore

TMS Campus
March 20, 2001

One of two U.S. Naval Academy football players charged with raping a female classmate last summer was recently accused of raping a Baltimore college student.

Authorities are looking into new allegations that 22-year-old Cordrea Brittingham, who was charged with rape stemming from a June 30 incident last summer, may have raped the Baltimore woman in his Berlin, Md.,

home four days prior to the June 30 incident.

The Baltimore college student didn't file charges with the Anne Arundel County authorities until December.

Brittingham was charged with second-degree rape, second-degree attempted rape, third-degree sex offense and conspiracy to commit second-degree rape stemming from the June 30 incident, according to the Anne Arundel County prosecutor's office.

Arion Keith Williams, 22, was also

charged in the June 30 incident with second-degree rape, attempted second-degree rape, second-degree sexual offense, attempted second-degree sexual offense, third-degree sexual offense, and conspiracy to commit second-degree rape, prosecutors said.

In the case against Williams and Brittingham, prosecutors have put the charges on hold under a settlement requiring that they resign from the academy and have no contact with the female Navy student.

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