

Although few meetings are happening for U.S.-based groups outside of the country's borders right now, the day will come when attendees will feel comfortable venturing out again. While we wait, Mexico's most popular group destinations have been reopening this summer after a spring shut-down and are prepping for groups' return.

We talked to Mexico meetings industry experts about safety protocols, precautions and how they plan to welcome back business as safely as possible to some of the country's most popular group destinations.

Safety and Sanitation Protocols

By now, most of the major hotel chains have released comprehensive sanitation guidelines. Depending on where you are thinking of booking a meeting in Mexico, the property you research should have clear guidelines in place detailing how they are welcoming back guests.

Additionally, meeting planners should rely on destination experts in Mexico's popular locales, like CVBs and DMCs, for updates on reopening guidelines and safety protocols.

For example, the Los Cabos Tourism Board has a detailed toolkit of guidelines for every aspect of travel—from transportation at the airport and in cars to the experience at hotels, restaurants and other service providers.

"We have a team inside the tourism board who works to put together the meetings protocols," said Rodrigo Esponda, managing director for Los Cabos Tourism



RODRIGO ESPONDA



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Board. "And we have a specific section online [for COVID-19] that's updated weekly. In February, we also created an email—covid19@visitloscabos.com—for specific questions related to COVID-19."

Adam Lawhorne, CEO of Meeting Incentive Experts (MIE)—a full-service destination management company headquartered in Chicago that has offices in Los Cabos, Cancun and Puerto Vallarta—spent the first five months of the pandemic sheltering in Los Cabos and recently wrapped a site visit in Cancun. He saw sanitation practices first-hand at many of Mexico's popular meetings and incentive properties.

"Mexico has always had good health and safety protocols. A lot of these were done way before COVID came, like the sanitizing of equipment and rooms and using Clorox bleach products. A lot of these things were already in place. We are just seeing it up front now," he said. "The one big thing that we need to be careful with is gathering and wearing masks. And people in Mexico really get it."

Lawhorne also witnessed some of the changes happening in how food is served. Mexico's all-inclusive resorts are well-known for their wide range of food options and buffets, and buffets have been a major point of concern for meeting planners and attendees during the pandemic because

they are considered high touch.

"They are not doing serve-yourself buffets at hotels [in Mexico]. It's all pre-selection with a chef," he explained. "There is plexiglass in front of all the food. You pick your food, and they serve you the food. This way, you see what you're getting and you still get what you want."

"It's a lot more labor for hotels and restaurants," he added.

Lawhorne said that each state in Mexico has slightly varied guidelines in response to the pandemic, much like the U.S. Checking in on the government state mandates is recommended for meeting planners looking to book trips in those destinations:

- Los Cabos is in Baja California Sur
- Cancun and Riviera Maya are in Quintana Roo
- Puerto Vallarta is in Jalisco

At publication time, some commonalities include:

- Most hotels and resorts in Mexico are operating at 30% capacity.
- Technically, land-border crossings from Mexico have been limited to "essential travel" since March (this includes travel by land, ferry or rail), but air travel is less restricted, with international flights still operating. Passengers arriving in Mexico may have to undergo health screenings.



MIE TEAM ZIPLINING

Rely on Destination Experts for Site Visits

Relying on destination experts like DMCs and CVBs is always a crucial step in the meeting planning process, but it is becoming even more essential when planners cannot conduct in-person site visits.

Lawhorne said that this summer, his team members based in Los Cabos, Puerto Vallarta and Cancun have been conducting site inspections; participating in activities like ziplining and excursions; experiencing the dining; all to see how tour companies and properties are operating under the new health and safety guidelines so they can report back to their clients.

"It's great to visit our vendors. We are checking up on their procedures and giving them feedback about what we have seen

Resources like CVBs and tourism boards are invaluable as well. While its destination was shut down, the Los Cabos Tourism Board and local hospitality professionals like hotels worked together to address safety concerns and create helpful resources in the destination.

On its aforementioned COVID-19 toolkit page that's updated weekly with reopening guidelines and government mandates, Los Cabos Tourism Board also publishes which hotels and resorts are open, and has been offering virtual experiences in the interim.

Testing Small Meetings

With many safety protocols tested and in place, small meetings are beginning to happen in Mexico. At the end of July, Los Cabos hosted its first meeting since the

meeting spaces in Los Cabos. Such large spaces provide ample room for social distancing, which will likely be the norm for the short-term future.

Esponda also noted that more small meetings are scheduled to take place in Los Cabos, including the World Meeting Forum at Paradisus Los Cabos at the end of the summer, which is expected to bring in up to 200 attendees.

As for incentives, Esponda said that Los Cabos does have some business on the books in the coming year, but thinks those events may be structured a little differently—in waves.

"Some have been broken down in back-to-back groups," he said "Instead of bringing 120, you make groups of 40 and bring them back to back."

Lawhorne is seeing client interest in this "wave" concept as well in Mexico, which is a popular incentive destination.

"Your groups of 1,000-1,500 people are now going to be 20% to 30% smaller," he said. "You may see waves of 250 this week, 250 that week. That way [the company] can show they are keeping their team safer."

Sunny weather and an abundance of outdoor spaces at resorts, on beaches, in addition to plentiful golf courses give Mexico destinations another edge, as outdoor gatherings are preferred to indoor currently because of better air quality and more room to spread out. 



elsewhere," Lawhorne said. "We all need to come together and have very good protocols when it comes to health and safety.

"We have spent hours on Zoom calls just learning what the best practices are," he added. "But we have very good protocols and guidelines for our clients to make sure they have a safe and healthy event, and also have a great time.

"It's very important to take a look at safety in a destination and have an emergency plan," Lawhorne continued. "We make all of our vendors sign with us, saying that they will abide by our protocols which are U.S. CDC-approved protocols. I think when you are picking a partner it's really important you pick someone who does something like that."

pandemic began—PCMA Mexico Chapter's Professional Exchange—with the purpose of reviewing what the destination is doing right now, how it can improve, and what the future of the meetings landscape may look like in Los Cabos.

"Some meeting planners had been there before. Their point of view was how the destination is evolving, and some were coming for the first time," Esponda said. For some attendees, he noted, it was their first time attending a face-to-face meeting since the pandemic started.

The meeting of 90 people was held at the new Hard Rock Hotel Los Cabos under strict health and social distancing guidelines. The property, which opened in November 2019, is home to the largest



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